

[Threads of Sand, Scar & Scripture]
Sudanese Art & the Ethics of Witnessing:
A Post-Interpretive Study

PHOTO: JUAN CARLOS BETRÁN

DORIAN VALE

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MUSEUM OF ONE

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Preface

I am not writing this book to prove that Sudan has art, as though beauty requires a passport stamp from empire before it can be believed.

I am writing because Sudanese art has spent too long being treated as either folklore, softened for foreign appetites, or as "politics"; hardened into slogans that let institutions pretend they've understood the suffering they merely visited. Between those two violences, the work itself is left unattended: the cloth, the pigment, the geometry, the breath of pattern, the disciplined silence that learned to survive in public. Interpretation, when it arrives too quickly, becomes a second occupation. It enters with confidence, it names what it has not sat with, and it leaves the viewer feeling informed rather than changed.

This book refuses that speed. It refuses the museums habit of turning living forms into legible trophies. It also refuses nostalgia, the sentimental kind that treats Sudan as a lost paradise rather than a present, breathing complexity.

Sudanese art is not a decorative annex to history; it is one of history's most stubborn witnesses. It carries fracture without advertising it. It carries devotion without asking permission. It carries memory without flattening it into "influence." If you approach it with the wrong posture—hungry for meanings, impatient for summaries—you will mistake its restraint for absence. But restraint is not emptiness. In Sudan, restraint

is often the condition of staying alive. So I have structured this book as a series of lenses, not categories, not movements, not a checklist of masterpieces. A lens is an ethic. A lens is a way of holding your gaze so it doesn't become predatory.

Each lens asks a different kind of attention: one attends to rupture, another to scripture, another to oral memory, another to craft, another to exile, another to architecture, another to war, and finally, to ghosts. Not ghosts as metaphor, but as the real afterlife of what Sudan was made to forget: slavery, assimilation, forced hierarchies of identity, suppressed civilizations, and the quiet violence of being misnamed by the world.

This is not a comprehensive history. It is something harder: a custodial approach. I will not claim a final map of Sudanese art. I will instead build rooms in which you can stand long enough for the work to begin addressing you. The critic is not the one who speaks first. The critic is the one who stays.

If a sentence in this book ever feels too certain, too triumphant, too quick, treat that as a failure of discipline. Sudan does not need another authorial conquest. It needs witnesses with clean hands.

A word about what this book will not do: it will not rescue. The rescue narrative, where the Western writer "discovers" or "elevates" the neglected artist is itself a rehearsal of dominance. It assumes the work was waiting, inert, for external validation. But Sudanese artists have never stopped working.

They have organized exhibitions in Khartoum and Omdurman while the international art world looked elsewhere. They have maintained studios through coups, through sanctions, through the amputation of South Sudan, through the 2019 revolution, through the war that began in 2023. The work did not pause for

permission. It does not require my advocacy to exist. What it requires is a different quality of attention, one that can receive complexity without immediately seeking to resolve it.

This also means the book will not offer comfort. There is a particular kind of reader who approaches books about non-Western art seeking affirmation, a sense of having done the right thing by paying attention. But attention is not inherently ethical. Attention can be surveillance. Attention can be appetite. The question is not whether you look, but how you hold what you see afterward. Do you let it disturb your categories? Do you let it refute your assumptions about what art from this region is "supposed" to do? Or do you metabolize it quickly into the familiar, into "resistance art," "diaspora art," "postcolonial art" and move on, your worldview intact?

The lenses I offer are not neutral. They are chosen because they refuse the easy routes. They ask you to contend with what makes Sudanese art illegible to the institutions that claim to celebrate "global" art while still operating from a profoundly local (which is to say, Western) center of gravity.

They ask you to sit with practices that do not announce themselves, with artists who refuse the performance of marginality, with forms that carry knowledge in ways the academy has not learned to read. If this makes the book difficult, that difficulty is not a flaw. It is a threshold. It is the work asking you to meet it on terms other than your own.

One last clarification: when I say "Sudanese art," I do not mean a singular, unified tradition. I mean the plural, contested, stratified, and sometimes contradictory practices that have emerged from a land whose borders were drawn by others, whose populations have been divided and renamed, whose

internal diversity — linguistic, ethnic, religious, regional — has often been flattened by external narratives that preferred a simpler story. There is no single Sudan in these pages.

There are Sudans; the Sudan of the Nile and the Sudan of the desert, the Sudan of the Sufi lodges and the Sudan of the revolutionary street, the Sudan that remembers Kush and Meroë and the Sudan that was told to forget them, the Sudan of the mahogany-skinned South and the Sudan that tried to bleach itself into Arabness.

All of these Sudans have made art. All of them have left traces. And all of them deserve more than a footnote in someone else's story.

Let the record show: I am not here to translate Sudan into the language of others. I am here to return attention to what endured without being understood.

1

The Lens of Origin: The Unwritten Archive, Before Islam, Before Labels

The first violence done to Sudanese art is the demand that it introduce itself. The second is the insistence that it do so in someone else's categories: "pre-Islamic," "animist," "tribal," "primitive," "folk." These words arrive like polite chains. They don't simply describe, they reduce. They make the past sound like a childhood of mankind, as though whole civilizations were merely rehearsal for a future that would finally become "civilized" when the right empire, the right scripture, or the right museum arrived. But Sudan's earliest aesthetics were not naive beginnings. They were completed worlds. They were technologies of attention, protection, and continuity, systems built to keep life coherent against the desert's indifference and history's appetite.

To call this realm an "unwritten archive" is not to romanticize illiteracy. It is to acknowledge a different form of inscription, one older than the page and often more disciplined than the book. There are cultures that write with ink and cultures that write with posture. Sudan, long before formal institutions, wrote with

rhythm, with scar, with pattern, with the careful placement of symbols on bodies and objects, signs meant not for museums but for weather, ancestors, illness, envy, and fate. An archive, in this sense, is not a room of documents. It is a set of behaviors that preserves meaning without needing to announce it. If you stand beside these works and ask first, "What does this mean?" you have already missed the ethical priority. The first question is: "What did this do?" Because in Sudan, long before the Western invention of "art" as a separate kingdom, form was often inseparable from function, and beauty was not an accessory, it was a method of survival.

There is a particular arrogance in how modern eyes approach the ancient and the ritual. We assume that what is beautiful must be symbolic, and what is symbolic must be optional. But protection is not optional, memory is not optional. The continuity of a people, especially a people living on thresholds of heat, scarcity, migration, and political violence, has never been a leisurely project. It requires tools, and among the oldest tools Sudan refined was the tool of form: the ability to embed instruction into pattern, to embed boundaries into adornment, to embed cosmology into the simplest repeated mark. A line is never merely a line when the world is unstable. A repeated shape is never merely decoration when repetition is the only reliable law the earth still obeys.

So the aim of this chapter is not to "trace influences" as though Sudan's early forms existed to anticipate later religions or later nations. It is to restore dignity to what was already dignified: Nubian legacies, Kushite architectures of power and afterlife, Nilotic cosmologies of river and cattle and sky, and a wide constellation of ritual practices—some named, some unnamed—that treated the unseen not as superstition but as

environment. The modern mind loves to believe that the unseen began when metaphysics began, or when scripture arrived, or when philosophy made it respectable. Sudan's older truth is quieter: the unseen was always there, because the unseen is simply what the world contains beyond the arrogance of human measurement. To live near the Nile is to know that what nourishes can also drown. To live near the desert is to know that what appears empty can kill. When a culture has lived with that kind of elemental intimacy, its aesthetics become more than expression. They become etiquette toward reality.

Begin, then, with this refusal: we will not speak of "primitive art." Not because we are trying to be politically polite, but because the term is intellectually lazy. "Primitive" is what conquerors call what they do not have the patience to learn. It is what institutions call what they want to keep in their hierarchy's basement. It is also what a certain kind of scholarship reaches for when it wants to feel advanced. But the truth is that Sudan's early aesthetic systems—whether carved into stone, shaped into pottery, woven into cloth, marked onto skin, arranged into burial architecture—display a sophistication that is not always legible to modern education because modern education has been trained to see knowledge only when it is written in the language of elites. Yet knowledge has many costumes. In Sudan, one of them was pattern, another was ritual, another was the body itself.

But what does it mean to treat the body as archive? It means you do not store memory only in books; you store it in the ways you move, the ways you adorn, the ways you mark transitions: birth, initiation, marriage, grief, death. It means the self is not merely individual but inscribed by lineage. It means aesthetics are not private taste but communal code. Some marks, some

scars, some pigments—whatever one thinks of them ethically today—were part of a social grammar: they told stories of belonging, endurance, protection, status, and covenant. In many places, scarification is discussed with either horror or romanticism, both of which are forms of distance, but the ethical approach is neither. It is witness: to acknowledge that in societies where the body was vulnerable to environment and predation, the body also became the first site where meaning could be stabilized. To mark the body was, in part, to refuse the body's anonymity. It was to say: I am not merely living. I belong to a world that recognizes me. And beyond the body, the land itself was read as a kind of text. Before scripture, there was weather. Before theology, there was drought.

Before doctrine, there was the Nile's generosity and its threat. River-based cosmology is not a poetic flourish; it is an epistemology. It teaches that life is contingent, cyclical, and distributed. A river does not obey a single ruler, it is a system, it nourishes and destroys without moral performance. Cultures formed around such a force develop an intelligence that is neither purely scientific nor purely mythic. It is practical metaphysics: an understanding that unseen causes can shape visible outcomes, and that one must behave with care toward forces one cannot command. This is why talismanic thinking—so often mocked by the modern voice—should be approached here not as irrationality but as an attempt to negotiate vulnerability. A talisman is a technology of reassurance when formal power is absent. It is also a device of agency in a world that often refuses agency to the weak. When you cannot control disease, you produce protective marks. When you cannot command the politics of your region, you anchor your home with ritual. When the world is full of envy, hunger, and loss, you create objects

that hold a promise: that protection can be made visible. Even if that protection is psychological, it is still a form of care. And care is not lesser because it is invisible.

Much of civilization is built on invisible agreements: trust, lineage, prayer, taboo. Sudan's older aesthetic artifacts are saturated with these agreements. They do not ask to be "appreciated." They ask to be understood as evidence of a people refusing collapse.

At this point the Western reader often asks, impatiently: "But where is the art?" The question reveals the problem. The Western category of "art" is historically specific: it assumes an object made primarily for contemplation, separated from utility, displayed in spaces dedicated to aesthetic leisure. That is not the universal condition of beauty. Sudan's earlier forms often refuse that separation. A pot is not only a container; it is a family's continuity. A textile is not only a surface; it is a map of belonging. A carved figure may not be "sculpture" in the museum sense; it may be a mediator, a guardian, a witness to rites that keep the community intact. If you insist on the museum definition, you will keep misreading what you see. The correct move is to widen the category until it can hold the world's variety without humiliating it.

And now we must speak—briefly, but with gravity—of the ancient civilizations that make the phrase "unwritten archive" feel almost like an understatement. Nubia and Kush are not footnotes. They are not peripheral echoes of Egypt. They are their own architectures of power and imagination, with their own aesthetic logics and political structures. To understand Sudanese art without acknowledging these legacies is like trying to understand a cathedral while refusing to look at its foundation stones. Yet these legacies are often filtered through Egypto-

logical obsession, as though Nubia matters only insofar as it relates to Egypt. This is a kind of intellectual colonialism: even scholarship can be an annex.

The custodial posture insists otherwise. Sudan's ancient forms deserve to be approached as Sudan's—full stop—without requiring external validation.

In those ancient worlds, the relationship between art and afterlife was not decorative. It was governmental. Tomb architecture, ritual object-making, and ceremonial design were forms of political metaphysics: they organized the community's relationship to death, memory, legitimacy.

The dead were not simply gone. They were present as a pressure on the living. The living responded with form: burial practices, objects, inscriptions, arrangements of space meant to sustain continuity beyond the visible horizon. If modern aesthetics often asks, "What is beautiful?" ancient aesthetics often asked, "What endures?" That is a deeper question, and it produces a different kind of beauty: not beauty as spectacle, but beauty as scaffolding for permanence.

Here a Post-Interpretive instinct becomes necessary. Because the temptation is to translate all these practices into symbolism: "This animal means that virtue," "This shape represents that deity," "This ritual signifies that belief." Sometimes such readings are accurate. Often they are lazy. They allow the analyst to feel intelligent without being accountable to the lived context of the object. Symbolism can become a shortcut that replaces encounter.

But many early Sudanese forms were not created to communicate abstract meanings to strangers. They were created to operate within a community's shared knowledge. To treat them as puzzles for the outsider is to invert their ethic. The

correct posture is restraint: to admit what we do not know, to refuse to fill gaps with elegant speculation, and to let the object remain partially closed to us without punishing it for that closure. Because closure is not failure. Closure can be dignity. A culture is not obligated to be fully legible to the visitor.

And so the chapter's central claim begins to sharpen: Sudan's earliest aesthetic life was not "before art." It was before the Western division between art and life. It was before institutions demanded that beauty justify itself. It was before the colonizer's gaze arrived with its measuring instruments and its hunger to classify. It was a world in which form was intimate with survival, where the seen and unseen were not opposites but neighbors, and where the community's continuity depended on objects and patterns that carried memory forward without needing a museum to make them respectable.

This has consequences for how we will approach everything that comes later. It means that when Islam arrives—when scripture enters the aesthetic climate—it does not enter an empty room. It enters a world already fluent in pattern, already disciplined in ritual, already skilled in encoding the unseen into form. This is why Sudanese Islamic aesthetics will later feel like a "third thing," a whisper between Arab and African categories: because Sudan was already a thirdness.

The pre-Islamic archive does not vanish; it becomes substrate. It becomes the soil into which later forms root themselves. No culture begins when a religion arrives. Religions arrive into climates, and they are shaped by what they find. In Sudan, what they found was a people already trained in the ethics of pattern. So we end where we began: with the refusal of reduction. "Pre-Islamic" is a useful chronological marker, but it is a dangerous aesthetic insult if it is used to imply incompletion. Sudan was

not waiting for its meaning. Sudan was living it.

The older forms are not relics of ignorance; they are records of intelligence, an intelligence that did not need academic language to be real. They are evidence that a society can build a sophisticated relationship to the unseen without metaphysical pride, and can build beauty not as luxury but as a discipline that keeps life coherent.

The Pyramid Fields No One Teaches

There is a specific ignorance that haunts the Western imagination when it encounters Sudan's ancient past, and it centers on a single fact that should be impossible to ignore but somehow is: Sudan has more pyramids than Egypt. Not metaphorically. Not "pyramid-like structures." Actual pyramids. More than two hundred of them, clustered in the desert at sites like Meroë, Nuri, and El-Kurru; steep-sided, stone-built, deliberate monuments to royal power and cosmic order. Yet ask most educated people to name a pyramid culture and they will say Egypt. Ask them to name a second and they will say nothing, or reach vaguely toward Central America. Sudan does not appear. This is not accidental ignorance. It is curated absence.

The pyramids of Meroë alone should be enough to force a reckoning. They rise from the sand in clean geometric defiance, smaller than Giza's colossi but no less intentional, no less invested with the logic of permanence. They were built between roughly 300 BCE and 300 CE, at the height of the Meroitic Kingdom, when Kush had already outlived multiple Egyptian dynasties and developed its own script, its own trade networks, its own theological imagination. These were not imitations. They were responses, aesthetic arguments made in stone about

what it means to govern, to die, to be remembered. The steep angle of the Meroitic pyramid is distinct from the Egyptian profile. It announces itself differently. It refuses to be a copy. And yet scholarship, for over a century, treated Meroë as Egypt's backwater, as though sophistication could only flow north to south, never the reverse.

This is where the violence of chronology becomes clear. Because Kush did not simply exist after Egypt's decline. Kush existed alongside Egypt, sometimes in conflict, sometimes in alliance, and at one point—during the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty—Kushite kings ruled Egypt itself. Pharaohs with names like Piye, Shabaka, and Taharqa came from what is now Sudan and commanded the entire Nile Valley. They built in both Egyptian and Kushite styles. They understood both iconographies. They were not provincial imitators; they were cosmopolitan rulers navigating a region of multiple powers. To treat them as footnotes is to misunderstand the political and aesthetic complexity of the ancient Nile as a whole.

And the material culture they left behind is not silent. Pottery from Meroë shows a refinement of technique and a discipline of decoration that speaks to workshops, apprenticeships, and aesthetic lineages. The painted ceramics—red and black on buff, with geometric precision—were not peasant craft.

They were prestige objects, items of display and exchange. Metalwork, particularly in gold and iron, was another Meroitic strength. Iron smelting in Meroë was extensive enough that some archaeologists have called the city "the Birmingham of ancient Africa" a label that, while reductive, at least acknowledges industrial capacity.

Gold, meanwhile, moved through Meroë's economy as both currency and symbol, adorning royalty, filling tombs, anchoring

trade with Rome, with Arabia, with the interior of Africa. These were not isolated villages. These were nodes in a network.

But here the archive becomes contested, because much of what we know about Meroë comes not from Meroitic voices but from Greek, Roman, and Egyptian sources, external perspectives that saw Kush through the distortions of empire. Classical writers like Herodotus, Strabo, and Pliny describe the region with a mix of fascination and condescension, calling its people "Ethiopians" (a Greek term meaning "burnt-faced") and attributing to them both great wealth and barbarism, depending on the writer's mood.

These accounts cannot be dismissed—they contain useful details—but they also cannot be trusted as neutral. They are the conqueror's ethnography, the trader's rumor, the rival's caricature. They tell us more about how outsiders wanted to see Kush than about how Kush saw itself.

What makes this loss sharper is that the Meroitic script—an alphabetic writing system developed around 300 BCE—remains only partially deciphered. We can identify phonetic values for many signs. We can read names and a few formulaic phrases. But the grammar, the syntax, the full semantic range of the language remains largely opaque. This means that Meroë's own voice; its literature, its theology, its administrative records, its poetry if it had any is still locked inside inscriptions we can see but not fully hear. The irony is bitter: a civilization sophisticated enough to invent its own writing system is still forced to speak to us primarily through the secondhand accounts of its neighbors and enemies. The unwritten archive, in this case, is not unwritten. It is unread.

And yet even in this silence, the material speaks. Temple reliefs at sites like Naqa and Musawwarat es-Sufra show deities

and kings in procession, their iconography blending Egyptian motifs with distinctly Meroitic elements: gods with multiple arms, lions with exaggerated musculature, queens; yes, queens, because Meroë had a tradition of powerful female rulers called *kandakes* depicted with the same martial authority as kings. These are not marginal images. They are state propaganda, theological instruction, visual law. They organize the cosmos on stone so that the living know their place within it. To stand before these reliefs now, half-eroded by wind and time, is to stand before an aesthetic system that knew exactly what it was doing: asserting order, continuity, and legitimacy in a world that constantly threatened all three.

Pottery, Cattle, and the Grammar of Survival

Move south and west from the Nile's royal centers, and the aesthetic archive changes texture. Among the Nilotic people, *Dinka*, *Nuer*, *Shilluk*, and others, whose lives were organized not around monumental stone but around cattle, migration, and the flood rhythms of the Sudd, a different kind of formal intelligence emerges.

Here, the body becomes the primary site of aesthetic elaboration. Scarification patterns, the shaping of the skull in infancy, the cultivation of specific physical postures and gestures, all of these are forms of design, ways of making the self legible within a community's code. This is not decoration for its own sake. In societies where wealth is counted in cattle, where political authority is negotiated through oral performance and kinship, and where the environment offers few permanent materials for monumental building, the body becomes the most reliable surface for the inscription of identity. A young man's

scarification marks his passage into adulthood. A particular pattern on the forehead or torso signals lineage, clan, and sometimes individual achievement. The marks are painful. They are permanent. They are meant to be. Because permanence is the point. In a world of seasonal migration, of floods that erase settlements, of conflicts that scatter populations, the body is the one archive that moves with you.

Western observers have often reacted to these practices with discomfort, reading them as "mutilation" or "primitive self-harm." But this reaction reveals more about Western anxieties around bodily autonomy and aestheticized pain than it does about the practices themselves. The ethical stance here is not to celebrate or condemn from a distance, but to recognize that different cultures negotiate the relationship between pain, identity, and beauty in different ways. In many Nilotic communities, the willingness to endure scarification was understood as a test of courage, a public demonstration of one's readiness to endure hardship.

The aesthetic outcome—the patterns themselves—was inseparable from the ethical act of enduring. Form and fortitude were the same event. Cattle, too, carry aesthetic weight in these cultures, though this is often invisible to outsiders who see only economic function. A prized ox is not merely valuable; it is beautiful. Its color, its horn shape, its comportment; all of these are subjects of intense attention and verbal artistry. Cattle songs, composed and performed by young men, describe individual animals with the same precision and emotional investment that a European poet might reserve for a lover or a landscape. This is not metaphor, the ox is not standing in for something else, the ox is itself the occasion for aesthetic attention.

To dismiss this as "just agriculture" is to miss the point

entirely: these cultures do not separate the utilitarian from the beautiful. They understand that life itself can be the medium of art.

Pottery, meanwhile, travels between the domestic and the ceremonial. In many Sudanese cultures, ceramic production was and remains the domain of women, and the vessels produced carry both functional necessity and symbolic density. A water jar is shaped to balance on the head during long walks from well to home.

But it is also shaped to please the eye, to assert the skill of its maker, to fit within a community's sense of proper proportion. Some pots are burnished to a high sheen, their surfaces catching light in ways that transform the everyday act of fetching water into a moment of visual encounter. Others are incised with geometric patterns—lines, dots, crosshatching—that echo the scarification on bodies, the weaving in baskets, the arrangement of space in a homestead. Pattern, in this context, is a language. It does not need to "mean" something external to itself. It means coherence. It means continuity. It means that the world, despite its volatility, can still be organized.

The Christian Interlude and the Architecture of Conversion

And then there is the archive that even specialists often overlook: Christian Nubia. Between roughly the sixth and fifteenth centuries CE, the kingdoms of *Nobatia*, *Makuria*, and *Alodia* converted to Christianity; not the Christianity of Rome or Byzantium exactly, but a distinct Coptic-influenced tradition that developed its own theological emphases, its own liturgical language (Old Nubian), and its own visual culture.

Churches were built along the Nile, their walls covered in

frescoes depicting saints, biblical scenes, and ecclesiastical hierarchies. These were not crude provincial copies of Mediterranean models. They were sophisticated adaptations, works that took Byzantine iconographic conventions and translated them into a Nubian key.

The frescoes at Faras, uncovered in the 1960s before the site was flooded by Lake Nasser, remain among the most striking examples. Figures rendered in rich ochres, deep blues, and luminous whites stare out from the walls with an intensity that suggests not passive devotion but active spiritual combat. Angels hold swords, saints hold scrolls. Kings are depicted alongside bishops, the sacred and the political braided together in paint. The style is hieratic—flattened, frontal, iconic—but it is not lifeless.

There is a tension in these images, a sense that they are doing work, that they are not merely illustrating scripture but enacting protection, establishing presence, organizing space.

What makes Christian Nubian art particularly important for this book's argument is that it complicates any narrative that treats Sudan's aesthetic history as a simple progression from "traditional" to "Islamic." Christianity was not a marginal episode. It was a sustained cultural formation lasting nearly a millennium, longer than Islam has existed in some parts of northern Sudan.

And when Islam did arrive, it did not erase Christian Nubia overnight. There were centuries of coexistence, of trade, of intermarriage, of slow transformation. The aesthetic legacy of Christian Nubia, its attention to figuration, its use of architectural space as theological argument, its tradition of literacy and manuscript production did not vanish. It sank into the substrate, where it would later resurface in unexpected forms: in

the decoration of Quranic manuscripts, in the layout of religious schools, in the visual grammar of authority.

But Christian Nubian art also suffered a specific kind of erasure: colonial scholars, when they encountered it, often praised it primarily as evidence that "civilization" had reached Africa. The implicit logic was insulting; that Christianity brought art, that without external religion there could be no aesthetic sophistication. This misreads the evidence entirely. Christian Nubia was impressive not because Christianity arrived, but because Nubia already had the social organization, the craft traditions, the architectural knowledge, and the political will to make Christianity its own. The frescoes at Faras were painted by Nubian hands, commissioned by Nubian rulers, viewed by Nubian congregations. They were not imports, they were syntheses.

What the Silence Protects

There is always a point in this kind of historical accounting where the evidence runs out and speculation begins. We do not have diaries from Meroitic queens. We do not have manifestos from Dinka poets. We do not have treatises on aesthetics from Nubian bishops. The archive is fragmentary, and the fragments are unevenly distributed: more stone survives than wood, more gold than cloth, more monumental than domestic. The result is that we see power more clearly than we see dailiness.

We see kings more clearly than farmers. We see ritual objects more clearly than children's toys. This unevenness is not neutral. It shapes what we think we know about these cultures. It makes them seem more remote, more ceremonial, less human than they were.

But the silence also protects something. It protects the cultures from being fully consumed by external interpretation. It ensures that some portion of their world remains unavailable to the analyst's hunger. This is not romanticizing absence. It is acknowledging that incomplete knowledge can be a form of respect, a way of not pretending to possess what we do not.

So when we speak of the "unwritten archive," we are speaking of two things at once: the knowledge that was indeed preserved without alphabetic text, carried forward in practice and pattern and memory; and the knowledge that has been lost, that we can gesture toward but not recover, that leaves gaps in the historical record which we must resist the urge to fill with elegant invention. Both kinds of unwriting matter. Both make demands on how we proceed.

The first asks us to recognize intelligence in forms we have been trained to dismiss. The second asks us to hold our certainty lightly, to speak carefully, to admit when we are guessing.

And this is where the chapter ends: not with mastery, but with acknowledgment. Sudan's earliest aesthetic archive is vast, varied, and unevenly known. It includes monumental stone and intimate scars, gold and clay, script and song.

It was never waiting for validation. It was already complete on its own terms. And when later forms arrived—Christian, Islamic, colonial, modern—they did not replace this archive. They entered into conversation with it, sometimes violently, sometimes generatively, but always encountering a culture that had already developed its own answers to the questions: What endures? What protects? What makes a life coherent in a world that refuses coherence?

The next chapter will attend to what happened when scripture arrived with new rules about representation. But this chapter

has tried to do one thing only: to insist that what came before was not preparation. It was presence.

2

The Lens of the Land: River-Cosmology and Desert Intelligence

Sudan does not begin with a monument. It begins with a climate. Before the museum, before the manuscript, before the argument, there is heat that makes arrogance ridiculous, and water that makes survival feel like a prayer you must repeat daily.

To approach Sudanese art without approaching Sudan's elements first is to read a sentence while refusing its grammar. The Nile is not a setting. The desert is not scenery. They are teachers. They are the first curators. They trained the eye long before critics arrived with their soft lamps and clever language.

The Nile, in Sudan, is a kind of grammar because it organizes meaning through rhythm, recurrence, and consequence. It is not simply "a river." It is an ordinance: it decides where life gathers, how communities settle, what forms travel, what materials endure, what crops grow, what bodies can remain. Grammar does not merely enable speech; it disciplines it. In the same way, the Nile disciplines Sudanese form. It teaches that abundance and danger are not opposites. The same current that

nourishes can undo. The same generosity that grants continuity can also impose fear. When your largest blessing is also your most patient threat, you learn an intelligence that does not romanticize nature. You learn reverence without illusion. And reverence, when it is honest, becomes aesthetic restraint.

If the Nile is grammar, then rhythm is its first lesson. Water moves in cycles, and cycles train attention. Sudanese aesthetic systems—especially those rooted in pattern, repetition, and modular design—did not emerge only because "people liked decoration." They emerged because repetition is the only stable law in a world where politics shifts, borders shift, regimes shift, and even the soil can betray you. Pattern becomes a pact with continuity. To repeat a shape is to say: something still holds. Something still returns.

In a land where so much can be taken, the return itself becomes sacred.

Modern audiences often treat repetition as "ornament," as if the repeated motif were a pleasant extra on the surface of life. Sudan teaches a harsher truth: repetition is often how life stays intact. A woven pattern repeats because hunger repeats, because seasons repeats, because prayer repeats, because grief repeats, because the body repeats its vulnerabilities. The aesthetic becomes a mirror of reality's discipline. And out of that mirroring comes a strange mercy: if the world insists on repeating its hardships, the human being insists on repeating beauty back at it, not as denial, but as defiance.

Then there is the desert, which is not a place so much as an ethic. The desert does not negotiate. It does not flatter. It does not apologize. It offers you the brutal clarity of minimalism: take what you need, leave what you cannot carry, respect shade as if it were a currency, and understand that excess is

not glamorous, it is dangerous. In that sense, the desert is a philosopher older than any school.

It teaches that form must earn its place, it teaches that a line matters because it costs, it teaches that a structure matters because it stands against heat. It teaches that the body's relationship to space is moral, because space can either shelter you or expose you.

This is where Sudanese minimalism is born. Not the curated minimalism of galleries, but the existential minimalism of a land that will punish waste. Sudan understood restraint before modernism packaged it as taste.

The white cube may congratulate itself on simplicity, but the desert is the original critic: it strips you down until you can no longer hide behind ornament for ornament's sake. And yet Sudan does not become barren. It becomes precise. It learns the difference between emptiness and clarity. The desert does not teach absence. It teaches necessity.

And necessity, paradoxically, is one of the oldest sources of beauty.

Consider what heat does to architecture. It makes shade more valuable than display. It makes thickness, courtyards, ventilation, and orientation into aesthetic decisions. A wall is not just a wall; it is a defense against sun. A dome is not only a symbol; it is a way of managing air and space. The desert makes geometry practical, it gives rise to an architectural intelligence where elegance is measured by how well a structure protects human breath. That kind of elegance is not decorative, it is ethical, it refuses spectacle because spectacle does not cool the body.

It refuses unnecessary complexity because complexity, under heat, becomes punishment. This is why Sudanese space so

often "teaches posture." The environment forces the body into humility. You stand differently when the sun is relentless. You move differently when water is limited. You build differently when survival is an ongoing negotiation.

The Nile and the desert together create a dual pedagogy: one of flow, one of constraint. One teaches continuity through movement. The other teaches continuity through restraint. Sudanese aesthetics learns from both. The result is an art culture deeply fluent in tension: between abundance and scarcity, between fertility and severity, between curve and line, between the lushness of river-life and the austerity of desert-life. This tension is not a theme, it is the ground, and because it is the ground, it appears everywhere: in patterning that feels both organic and strict; in color palettes that hold sand tones and sudden blues; in textiles that move like water but repeat like law; in ornaments that are not indulgent but encoded.

When you begin to see nature as text, you stop treating environment as mere "influence." Influence is too soft a word. Influence implies choice, preference, the optional. Sudan's environment is closer to sovereignty. It doesn't "influence" form, it governs it. The critic must therefore change posture. You do not describe a river the way you describe a museum wall label, you read it as a set of instructions. You read the desert as a set of constraints that produce elegance. You read scarcity as a training regimen for the eye: it teaches you to value the small, the durable, the repeatable, the repairable. Repair, here, becomes a concept worth holding tightly. In environments where materials are scarce or hard-won, you do not discard easily. You mend. You patch. You reweave. And those acts of repair are themselves aesthetic acts, because they carry the visible trace of time and use. Sudanese material culture has

long understood what contemporary art sometimes pretends to discover: that the scar can be a form of truth. The patched textile is not inferior to the pristine one. It is often more honest. It tells you that life continued. It tells you that continuity was chosen. This is an aesthetic of endurance, not perfection, and endurance is a deeper form of beauty than shine.

This is also why water scarcity produces a distinct relationship to the idea of "waste." In many modern consumer cultures, waste is hidden: the trash removed, the excess normalized, the disposability disguised as convenience. Sudan's landscapes do not allow such denial. Scarcity makes waste visible. Waste becomes shameful not because of moral posturing but because of lived consequence. When you have had to carry water, you do not treat objects lightly. When shade is earned, you do not build carelessly. When food is contingent, you do not pretend that abundance is eternal. These conditions don't merely shape ethics, they shape taste. They produce a visual culture that understands necessity as form, and form as gratitude.

Now consider the Nile again, not only as flow but as memory. Rivers are archives without pages, they carry silt from elsewhere, they carry seeds, they carry the residue of what happened upstream. In that sense, the Nile is a teacher of interconnectedness, it instructs that no place is isolated. What happens in one region reaches another. This is not simply hydrology; it is a model for social reality.

Sudanese art—especially in its oral and craft traditions—often functions like a river: carrying fragments of lineage, migrating motifs, borrowed rhythms, inherited marks, and making them coherent without insisting on purity. Purity is a colonial obsession. Rivers are mixed. Sudanese art is often mixed. It does not apologize for hybridity because hybridity

is the land's logic. And so, when later scholars attempt to categorize Sudan as "Arab" or "African," they enact a violence against the river's truth. The river does not choose one identity. It travels. It accumulates. It integrates. The desert, too, doesn't belong to one category. It stretches across borders like a refusal. Sudan's environment therefore undermines the neatness of political identity projects. It teaches that the land itself is post-categorical. This is why Sudan's aesthetics often feel like "a third thing": because the land is a third thing, and the people learned their visual intelligence from it.

But there is a danger here: the danger of romanticizing. To speak of rivers and deserts poetically can become an escape from history's uglier textures. So let this be said with discipline: the environment's pedagogy has been intensified by political violence. Scarcity is not only natural; it has been weaponized. Water and land are contested. Communities are displaced. The desert expands not only through nature but through mismanagement and war. The Nile's blessing becomes a site of geopolitical struggle. In such conditions, aesthetics become even more ethically charged. Beauty is not a luxury; it is a way of maintaining the human when systems attempt to reduce people into numbers. A woven pattern becomes a refusal to be erased. A pot becomes a refusal to starve quietly. A house's geometry becomes a refusal to surrender dignity.

This is why I keep returning to the word pedagogy. Sudan's environment does not merely "inspire." It trains. It shapes. It disciplines. It teaches the eye what matters. It teaches that the smallest gesture—shade, water, repetition—can be the difference between life and collapse.

From this training emerges a unique aesthetic posture: one that does not worship excess, one that does not trust perma-

nence, one that values the durable and the repeatable, one that treats repair as beauty, one that recognizes that the most sacred forms are often the ones that keep you alive. And once you learn to read nature as text, you begin to understand why Sudanese art so often feels like it is speaking in a low voice. The land itself speaks in a low voice. It is not performative, it does not shout, it persists, and that persistence becomes the model for the work.

A river does not need applause. A desert does not need validation. Sudanese art, at its deepest, inherits that same sovereignty: it does not beg to be understood. It asks only to be approached with patience. In Sudan, environment isn't background, it is curriculum, and every serious aesthetic gesture is a lesson learned from water, heat, and the discipline of what cannot be wasted.

The Two Niles and the Geography of Difference

There is a geography lesson that matters here, one that is often flattened in casual discourse about "the Nile." Sudan is not fed by one river but by a confluence. The Blue Nile descends from the Ethiopian highlands, carrying volcanic silt and seasonal fury, its floods are dramatic, its contribution to Egypt's agricultural fertility historically greater than its calmer sibling.

The White Nile rises from the lakes of East Africa, flowing through the vast wetland of the Sudd in South Sudan before reaching Khartoum. These two rivers meet at the Mogran, the confluence that gives Khartoum its name and its reason for being. Stand at that meeting point and you can see the difference with your eyes: one river dark with sediment, one lighter, each maintaining its character for kilometers before they fully merge.

This confluence is not merely hydrological trivia. It is a

structural fact that shapes Sudanese reality. The Blue Nile brings fertility but also unpredictability, its floods could be blessing or catastrophe.

The White Nile brings steadiness, a more reliable flow, but less of the rich sediment that renews soil. Communities along each river developed different relationships to water, different agricultural calendars, different vulnerabilities. And because vulnerability shapes culture, it also shapes form. The pottery of the Blue Nile regions, the architecture of the White Nile zones, the textiles produced in areas dependent on seasonal flooding versus those in more stable zones, all of these carry the trace of their specific relationship to water.

What this means for aesthetics is that "Sudanese art" is already plural before you even introduce ethnic or religious difference. The land itself imposes variation. A weaver working near the Ethiopian border is working in a different environmental grammar than a weaver near the Sudd. The clay available in one region differs from the clay in another. The dyes that can be extracted from local plants vary. The rhythms of labor—when hands are free for craft, when they must turn to planting or harvest—shift according to the river's calendar.

To speak of "Sudanese aesthetics" as a singular entity is therefore already a simplification. What we are really speaking of is a family of practices shaped by related but distinct environmental pedagogies.

And then there is the question of the cataract. The Nile in Sudan is interrupted by six cataracts—stretches where the river becomes unnavigable, where granite intrusions force the water into rapids and narrow channels. These cataracts are not merely obstacles to trade; they are also political boundaries, cultural dividers, and linguistic frontiers.

Each cataract creates a zone of relative isolation. Communities between cataracts develop distinct dialects, distinct craft traditions, distinct architectural styles. The river that connects also separates.

This paradox—that the same feature which enables communication also imposes fragmentation—is fundamental to understanding Sudan's internal diversity. The cataracts also produce a specific kind of aesthetic knowledge: the knowledge of portage, of carrying goods and boats around obstacles, of maintaining networks despite interruption. This is not just logistics; it is a model for cultural continuity under conditions of rupture.

Sudanese aesthetics, especially in the northern riverine regions, often display this sensibility: they know how to maintain coherence across breaks, how to resume a pattern after interruption, how to signal continuity even when the material or political conditions have changed. A textile tradition may be disrupted by migration or war, but when it resumes, it picks up the thread. The pattern remembers, even when individuals have been displaced.

Heat as Sculptor: Architecture's Debt to the Sun

If water is Sudan's first teacher, heat is its most demanding examiner. To build in Sudan is to build against temperatures that regularly exceed 40 degrees Celsius, that turn metal too hot to touch, that make unshaded stone dangerous. Architecture, in this context, is not primarily about beauty in the decorative sense. It is about thermodynamics. It is about creating microclimates. It is about organizing space so that human bodies can survive.

This is where the genius of traditional Sudanese architecture becomes visible, not in ornament, but in intelligence. Consider the Malqaf, the wind-catcher: a tower designed to capture prevailing breezes and channel them down into interior spaces, creating ventilation without mechanical assistance.

The Malqaf is geometry in service of breath. Its form is determined entirely by function, yet the result is often striking, a sculptural element rising above the roofline, announcing its purpose through shape. This is architecture as atmospheric engineering, as the management of invisible forces. The beauty that emerges is not applied; it is consequent. The structure is elegant because it is efficient.

Or consider the courtyard house, a form found across Sudan's urban centers: thick exterior walls that absorb and slow the transmission of heat, a central open space that allows hot air to rise and escape, rooms arranged around this void so that no interior space directly faces the punishing afternoon sun. The courtyard becomes a breathing lung for the entire structure. It is also a social space, where families gather in the evening when temperatures fall, where children play in relative safety, where domestic work can occur in partial shade. The form is simultaneously thermal, social, and aesthetic. To separate these functions is to misunderstand the logic of the design.

What makes this architectural tradition particularly important is that it represents a pre-industrial solution to problems that contemporary "green architecture" is only now rediscovering. The language may be different—contemporary architects speak of "passive cooling," "thermal mass," "cross-ventilation"—but the principles are identical to those employed by Sudanese builders for centuries. The difference is that traditional Sudanese architecture never pretended these techniques

were innovations. They were simply the conditions of survival, and survival produced a vernacular of great sophistication.

But heat does not only shape architecture. It shapes the body's relationship to time. The hottest hours of the day—roughly from noon to four—are hours when labor becomes dangerous, when the prudent retreat into shade and stillness. This creates a daily rhythm fundamentally different from the industrial time-discipline of colder climates. Work happens in the early morning and late afternoon. Midday is for rest, for waiting, for the kind of stillness that looks like laziness to the European eye but is actually thermal intelligence.

This rhythm, in turn, shapes the pace of social life, the timing of markets, the hours when communal activities occur. And pace, we should note, is an aesthetic category. The slowness imposed by heat is not merely practical; it becomes a cultural value, a way of moving through the world. Sudanese social interactions often carry this rhythm: they do not rush, they unfold with deliberation, they allow silence and pause without anxiety. This is not universal—urban centers have their own frantic energy—but the traditional model remains influential. When you see this slowness in the pacing of oral storytelling, in the extended time given to greetings and farewells, in the way tea is prepared and consumed as a ritual rather than a caffeine delivery system, you are seeing the aesthetic residue of heat's discipline.

Materials and Their Limits: The Aesthetics of What Endures

Every environment offers a palette of materials, and that palette constrains and enables in equal measure. Sudan's material palette has historically been defined by what the land provides and what can be obtained through trade. Clay is abundant near the Nile. Certain grasses and reeds grow in riverine zones. Stone, particularly granite and sandstone, is available in specific regions.

Wood is scarcer, the region's trees are often acacia or other hardwoods that grow slowly and are too valuable for casual use. This scarcity makes wood a prestige material, reserved for doors, roof beams, furniture for the wealthy. The absence of extensive forests also means that monumental stone architecture, which in other regions might use wooden scaffolding and supports, must employ different construction techniques.

Clay, therefore, becomes the democratic material, available to rich and poor alike, plastic enough to take almost any form, durable when fired. Pottery in Sudan is not a minor craft; it is a foundational technology. Water storage, food preparation, grain storage, all depend on ceramic vessels. But beyond utility, pottery becomes a site of aesthetic elaboration. Women potters—and pottery has traditionally been women's domain in many Sudanese cultures—developing signature styles, regional variations, family techniques passed down through generations. The shapes are often determined by function: a water jar must balance on the head, a cooking pot must withstand direct heat, a storage vessel must seal against pests.

But within these functional constraints, infinite variation emerges. The surface treatment of pottery reveals this most

clearly. Some traditions favor burnishing, rubbing the leather-hard clay with a smooth stone until it achieves a lustrous surface that is both beautiful and less porous. Others incise geometric patterns while the clay is still soft, creating textured surfaces that catch light and shadow.

Still others apply slips—liquid clay of contrasting color—to create zones of dark and light, often in patterns that echo body scarification, textile weaving, or architectural decoration. These are not random choices, they are aesthetic arguments about what matters, about what deserves emphasis, about how an object should announce itself in the world.

Then there is the question of color. The desert's palette is limited: ochre, sienna, umber, white, black. But within those limitations, Sudanese aesthetics have learned to create remarkable variety. Natural dyes from plants—indigo for blue, henna for red-brown, various barks and roots for yellows and darker browns—allow textiles to introduce color that the landscape itself does not provide.

The blue of indigo-dyed cloth becomes particularly charged in a landscape of sand and heat. It is the color of shade, of water, of relief. To wear indigo is to carry coolness against the skin. This is not metaphor. The color becomes associated with its thermal properties, and aesthetic preference becomes entangled with bodily comfort.

Metalwork presents a different set of constraints. Iron, copper, and gold have all been worked in Sudan historically, but access to these materials required either local mining—which was possible in certain regions—or trade networks. The result is that metal objects carry prestige.

They are not everyday items. A silver bracelet, an iron blade, a copper vessel, these are objects that move through

economies as stores of wealth, as bride-price, as inheritance. Their aesthetic elaboration often reflects this value: engraved decoration, hammered patterns, careful attention to finish. But the decoration is rarely excessive. Metal is too valuable to waste on purely ornamental excess. The decoration that appears tends to be integrated with structure, reinforcing joints, marking ownership, or carrying protective inscriptions.

This brings us to a critical point about Sudanese aesthetics and materials: the culture of maintenance. In environments where materials are precious and replacement difficult, objects are expected to last. They are also expected to be repairable. A ceramic vessel cracks, and rather than discard it, you bind it with leather strips or metal wire. A textile tears, and you patch it with contrasting fabric, creating a visible history of repair. These repairs are not hidden as flaws. They become part of the object's biography, evidence of its utility and its owner's care.

This aesthetic—what we might call the aesthetic of visible mending—runs counter to consumer culture's preference for the pristine and the disposable. It insists that use-value and beauty-value are not opposed. An object that has been maintained, that shows the trace of human care over time, gains a dignity that the new object does not yet possess.

The Sudd and the Problem of Permanence

Move south, into the territory that now forms South Sudan, and the environmental pedagogy shifts dramatically. Here the Nile becomes the Sudd, one of the world's largest wetlands, a vast swampy expanse where the White Nile loses itself in papyrus, reeds, and seasonal flooding. The Sudd is neither solid land nor open water. It is a third thing, a landscape in constant

negotiation between states. Islands appear and disappear. Channels shift. What was navigable one season becomes impassable the next. To build in such an environment is to build with the knowledge that permanence is impossible. Structures must be temporary, portable, or built on stilts. Materials must be local and renewable, grasses, reeds, mud that can be reapplied annually.

This is not architecture in the monumental sense. It is architecture as seasonal practice, as ongoing maintenance rather than one-time construction. The aesthetic that emerges from this condition is utterly different from the stone-and-permanence tradition of the northern riverine zones. It is an aesthetic of flexibility, of lightness, of forms that can be assembled and disassembled as needed.

The Dinka, Nuer, and other Nilotic groups developed architectural forms perfectly suited to this environment: circular houses with conical thatched roofs, built on raised platforms during flood season, with walls of woven reeds that allow air circulation while providing some privacy and protection from insects. These structures are often described by outsiders as "simple" or "primitive," but this reveals only the observer's prejudice. The structures are sophisticated responses to specific conditions. They are thermally intelligent, the thatch provides insulation, the open weave allows breeze. They are materially intelligent, built entirely from renewable local resources. They are socially intelligent, the circular form creates no corners, no hierarchy of space within the dwelling, reflecting egalitarian social structures.

But what happens to visual culture when permanence is not an option? The answer is that it migrates to other mediums. If you cannot build monuments, you invest aesthetic energy in the

body, in song, in cattle, in oral performance.

The Dinka and Nuer are famous for their cattle culture, and within that culture, aesthetics reach an extraordinary level of elaboration. Cattle are bred not only for milk or meat but for color patterns, horn shape, and comportment. Young men compose songs praising particular oxen, songs that display verbal artistry comparable to any written poetry. The ox becomes a living artwork, a mobile aesthetic object that testifies to its owner's taste, wealth, and poetic skill.

This should trouble any definition of "art" that requires permanence or museums. The Sudd teaches that beauty can be utterly ephemeral, a cattle song performed once, a dance that exists only in the moment of its performance, a body decoration that will wash away with the next rain. These are not lesser forms of aesthetic practice. They are forms adapted to an environment that will not support the archive. They are intelligence refusing to be erased simply because it cannot be stored.

When Rivers Become Political: The Dam and the Drowned Archive

No discussion of the Nile in Sudan can avoid the political. Water is never neutral. The construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt, completed in 1970, fundamentally altered the Nile's behavior in Sudan.

The dam created Lake Nasser, which extended far into Sudanese territory, flooding archaeological sites, displacing Nubian communities, and ending the annual flood cycle that had structured life along the river for millennia. Entire villages vanished underwater. Temples were relocated or lost.

An aesthetic heritage—the Nubian architectural tradition, with its distinctive painted houses and decorated courtyards—was partially drowned, partially displaced, partially abandoned. This was not natural disaster. This was political choice. Egypt's need for hydroelectric power and flood control took precedence over Sudan's cultural continuity.

The flooded zone included some of the richest archaeological territory in Sudan, sites like Buhen, Semna, and portions of the area around the Second Cataract. International teams conducted salvage archaeology, and some monuments were moved (the temples of Abu Simbel being the most famous example), but much was lost. Not only ancient sites, but living communities. Not only monuments, but the everyday material culture of villages: the houses, the granaries, the courtyards where women painted geometric patterns on walls as both decoration and spiritual protection.

The displaced Nubians were relocated to new settlements in less fertile areas. The new houses were often standardized concrete structures, designed for efficiency rather than cultural continuity. The traditional painted decoration—bold geometric patterns in red, white, yellow, and black—appeared in some new houses, but the social context that had sustained the practice was fractured. When you displace a community, you do not only move bodies. You disrupt the transmission of knowledge, the apprenticeship relationships, the social occasions that gave practices their meaning. Some traditions adapt. Some attenuate. Some die quietly.

This history matters for understanding contemporary Sudanese aesthetics because it introduces a quality that the earlier environmental discussion might seem to lack: rage. The river's pedagogy, when weaponized by politics, produces not only

adaptation but also resistance.

Nubian artists and cultural activists have worked for decades to document, preserve, and revive displaced traditions. The painted house becomes, in diaspora and displacement, not just decoration but defiance. It says: we are still here. Our aesthetics did not drown. This transforms the meaning of the work. What was once simply beautiful becomes also testimonial. The pattern now carries an argument, and this is where environmental determinism must be refused even as environmental pedagogy is acknowledged. Yes, the desert teaches restraint. Yes, the river teaches rhythm. But people are not passive recipients of environmental instruction. They argue back. They adapt. They make the environment a site of meaning-making even when—especially when—that environment has been turned against them. Sudanese aesthetics are shaped by climate, yes, but they are also shaped by the refusal to let climate become destiny.

A people who have survived droughts, floods, displacement, and damming do not simply "reflect" their environment. They contend with it. And that contention is visible in the work.

Color, Light, and the Discipline of the Eye

There is a final environmental lesson worth holding: the lesson of light. Sudan's light is not gentle. It is harsh, high-contrast, unforgiving. Shadows are sharp-edged. Midday sun bleaches color until everything becomes a version of white and gold. Dust in the air during *Haboob* season turns the sky ochre and obscures visibility to a few meters. This is light as force, light as weather.

Such light trains the eye differently than the soft, diffuse light of northern Europe that so much art history takes as its norm. In harsh light, subtlety becomes invisible. Soft pastels wash

out. Gentle gradations disappear. The eye learns to value strong contrast, bold pattern, clarity of form.

This is why Sudanese aesthetics so often favor geometric precision over organic ambiguity, why pattern is often high-contrast rather than tonal, why color, when it appears, tends toward saturation rather than subtlety. But harsh light also creates moments of extraordinary beauty, the brief window at dawn and dusk when the sun is low and the light turns amber, when the landscape glows, when even the desert becomes briefly tender. These liminal hours are not merely picturesque; they are survivable. They are when the body can move without punishment. They are when labor resumes. And they are when the eye, freed from the assault of midday glare, can register beauty without squinting. This daily rhythm—from harsh to gentle and back—creates an aesthetic awareness that values transformation, that understands beauty as contingent on the angle of light, on the time of day, on the moisture in the air.

Dust, too, becomes an aesthetic medium. During the *Haboob*—the massive dust storms that roll across Sudan from the desert—the air itself becomes material. Visibility drops. The world becomes monochrome. Architecture disappears into atmosphere. These are not pleasant experiences, but they are formative ones. They teach that the world is not stable, that clarity is temporary, that vision itself is a privilege that can be revoked. When the storm passes and the air clears, the return of visibility feels like a gift. The eye becomes grateful. And gratitude, we should remember, is an aesthetic condition as much as an ethical one.

This leads to a final thought about environmental pedagogy: it produces not only forms but also postures. It trains not only the hand but also the stance of attention. To live in Sudan is to

learn patience, to wait for water, to wait for the heat to pass, to wait for the dust to settle.

That patience becomes embedded in how beauty is approached. Sudanese aesthetics, at their most disciplined, do not demand immediate legibility. They reward sustained attention. They ask you to wait, to return, to sit with the work long enough for its logic to emerge. This is the river's lesson: that meaning unfolds in time.

This is the desert's lesson: that clarity requires stillness. And this is the light's lesson: that what you see depends on when you look.

So the chapter ends not with conclusions but with recognitions. Sudan's environment is not background. It is pedagogue, and every form that emerges from this land carries the trace of its teaching.

Water and heat, scarcity and light, flood and drought, these are not obstacles to beauty. They are its conditions. And those conditions have produced an aesthetic intelligence that does not need the West's approval to know its own value.

3

The Lens of the Body: Scar, Pattern, and Totem

Some cultures decorate. Others defend themselves with beauty. Sudan, for long stretches of its aesthetic life, belonged to the second kind, because when the world is unstable, the surface is not a vanity. It is a shield. The modern eye, trained to treat pattern as "design" and marks as "style," approaches Sudanese form with the wrong innocence. It assumes the visible is optional. But in many Sudanese contexts, the visible was a kind of contract with the unseen: a way of negotiating vulnerability, staking belonging, warding envy, gathering protection, holding memory where paper could not, and where institutions never promised to preserve you.

A mark, in this tradition, is not an illustration of an idea. It is an act. It does something. It binds, it warns, it consecrates, it claims, it remembers. That is why I want this chapter to sit, with discipline, inside the phrase "marks that keep the world intact." Not marks that "represent" the world, not marks that "express identity," not marks that function as aesthetic entertainment. Marks that keep the world intact, because

in a climate of scarcity, illness, social fracture, and the slow violence of history, intactness is not guaranteed. It is made. It is maintained. It is defended. And one of the oldest tools for that defense was form.

This is the point where the outsider—especially the museum-trained outsider—becomes dangerous. They arrive with a hunger to translate every pattern into a symbol, every animal into an allegory, every scar into "culture." But the drive to interpret is often a way of avoiding intimacy. It keeps you clever and distant. It turns human technologies of survival into puzzles you can solve and file away.

A Post-Interpretive posture requires another approach: you don't conquer these marks with meanings. You stay near them long enough to feel their seriousness. You admit what you cannot know. You refuse to reduce what was functional into what is merely "interesting."

Begin with scar, not as spectacle, but as inscription. Modern discourse loves extremes: either it condemns bodily marking as barbarity or it romanticizes it as authenticity. Both stances are forms of theft. They treat people's lived practices as material for our moral performance. The custodial stance is quieter: it acknowledges that in many contexts, the body itself became an archive because other archives were unavailable, untrusted, or irrelevant. The body was the one surface that traveled with you when you migrated. The body was the one object that could not be confiscated without violence. The body was where lineage could be carried in plain sight. To mark the body, then, was to refuse anonymity. It was to insist: I am recognized. I am placed within a world. I am not merely a disposable life drifting through heat.

Scarification, tattooing, and other bodily inscriptions are

often discussed as "identity." But identity is too modern a word, too individual, too psychological, too abstract. What these marks often encoded was relation: to clan, to ancestry, to marital status, to social role, to rite of passage, to protective cosmology.

In societies where the individual is not imagined as a free-floating self but as a node in a web of obligations, the body becomes a public document. Not in the bureaucratic sense—something cold and administrative—but in the communal sense: something that says you have been held, initiated, recognized. This does not make every mark admirable or ethically simple. It makes them intelligible as evidence of how communities manage continuity.

The specificity matters here. Among the Dinka and Nuer, parallel lines across the forehead—what was called *sholoukh* in northern Sudan or *gaar* among the Nuer—served as clan markers, visible from a distance. A child would undergo this at the threshold of adulthood, the cuts made with a blade or thorn, the healing process managed with ash or other substances to raise the keloid scars. The pain was part of the pedagogy: you learned endurance by enduring. You learned membership by bearing its mark. The body remembered what language could not always carry across generations fractured by conflict and displacement. But these were not abstract symbols floating in a void of pure meaning. They had practical consequences. In contexts where written documentation was scarce or inaccessible, where colonial administrators imposed borders that cut through kinship networks, where slave raids and violence made verbal testimony fragile, the body's inscription became a form of credential. To be marked was to be accountable, to a lineage, to a community, to a set of expectations. It was also,

in some cases, to be protected: certain marks were believed to have apotropaic power, warding off illness or the evil eye. Scars above the temples might relieve headaches.

Marks near vital organs might shield against spiritual harm. Whether these beliefs "worked" in a biomedical sense is less important than understanding that they worked as systems of care, as attempts to manage vulnerability in a world that offered few guarantees.

We must also acknowledge what is no longer present. The practice of facial scarification has declined dramatically across Sudan in recent decades, driven by urbanization, education, shifting aesthetic norms, and a younger generation's rejection of what many now perceive as outdated or disfiguring. Elders who bear these marks often speak of them with ambivalence: pride in their cultural heritage mixed with relief that their children will not have to carry the same visible difference in a world increasingly hostile to such markers.

This decline is not merely a story of "modernization" erasing "tradition." It is a story of people making calculated decisions about visibility, about the costs and benefits of being legible in particular ways. To be marked, in an earlier era, was to be placed. To be marked, in a globalized present, might be to be excluded.

But scar, in Sudan's broader aesthetic climate, is not only on the body. It appears as a principle. The land itself is scarred by borders, by displacement, by conflict, by drought.

Sudanese art learns early that fracture is not an exception. It is a condition. So scars appear everywhere: in patched textiles, in repaired pottery, in architecture adapted and readapted, in patterns that repeat because repetition is the only reliable law.

When you understand this, you stop treating repair as lesser. Repair becomes a signature of endurance. The patched cloth is

a kind of testimony: it declares that something worth keeping was kept. It says, with quiet defiance, that loss did not get the final word.

This is where the aesthetic intelligence of mending reveals itself. In a consumer culture that valorizes the new and the unblemished, repair is often invisible labor, relegated to the domestic and the feminine, dismissed as "making do." But in contexts where materials are scarce and objects are expected to last across generations, repair is a creative act. It requires attention to structure, to pattern, to the relationship between part and whole. A woven basket with a replaced section must maintain its integrity. A textile with a patched tear must still drape and fold. The *angareeb* bed frame, with its woven rope surface, will be re-strung when it sags, the old rope removed and new rope woven in the same pattern. The object's biography accumulates these interventions, and the object becomes richer for them, not despite the fact that it has been repaired, but because repair is evidence of value. Only what is loved gets mended.

Now pattern. Pattern is Sudan's great discipline, its long grammar of attention. In Western modernity, pattern often becomes "decorative"—a surface pleasure, a design choice, an ornament to be consumed. But in many Sudanese contexts, pattern is closer to ritual than decoration. It regulates space. It regulates time. It regulates the body's relationship to the home, to the community, to prayer, to work.

It is the aesthetic equivalent of repetition in worship: a way of stabilizing the mind and the world through ordered recurrence. This is why Sudanese patterning—whether in textile, architecture, henna, beadwork, or talismanic scripts, so often carries a seriousness that the museum's lighting cannot

capture. Under the spotlight, it looks like "style." In life, it is closer to infrastructure.

Consider the *Thoub*, the long rectangular cloth that Sudanese women drape around their bodies. At first glance, it might seem like a simple garment: a length of fabric, variously colored and patterned, worn in ways that signify modesty, elegance, and cultural belonging. But the *Thoub* is a technology.

It is roughly fifteen to twenty feet of material that must be wrapped, folded, and secured without pins or fasteners, in a way that allows movement while maintaining coverage. The skill required to wear a *Thoub* well is considerable: you must understand how fabric moves, how different weights of material behave, how to compensate for wind or for the physical demands of work. Young girls watch their mothers and grandmothers and learn through observation and practice. The *Thoub* becomes an extension of the body's intelligence.

And the patterns on that *Thoub* are not incidental. In traditional embroidery, geometric shapes—diamonds, triangles, hexagons—are arranged in interlocking formations. These are not random designs. They are motifs that have traveled through generations, carried forward through memory and repetition. They surface in textiles, in architecture, in henna, in beadwork. Across different materials and forms establishing a continuity of vision, a shared vocabulary through which a world learns to recognize itself.

When you see a familiar motif repeated, you are not just seeing something pretty. You are seeing memory made tangible.

Pattern also acts as a social memory device. It carries lineage without needing genealogy charts. Certain motifs travel through families, regions, and crafts like inherited names. A woven rhythm can hold centuries without ever being written down.

This is a kind of intelligence that modern literacy sometimes fails to respect: the ability to store history in the hands. When you see a pattern repeated across generations, you are not merely seeing taste. You are seeing continuity enacted. You are seeing memory made material. And this is why craft—often dismissed by art history—matters so profoundly in the Sudanese archive: because craft is where pattern becomes a living archive rather than a dead object.

This becomes clearer when we look at henna. Henna application—the dyeing of hands and feet with paste made from crushed henna leaves—is widespread across North Africa and the Middle East, but Sudanese henna has its own character. The designs are bold, dark, often covering large areas of skin rather than delicate tracery.

They favor geometric abstraction and flowing curves, sometimes incorporating floral elements but never in a naturalistic way. These are not "pictures" of flowers. They are distillations, essences, forms that gesture toward the organic world while remaining firmly rooted in the language of pattern.

And henna, like scarification, is a threshold practice. It marks transitions: marriage, festivals, celebrations. A bride's hands and feet will be hennaed the night before her wedding, in a ceremony attended by women, accompanied by song and storytelling. The henna itself is believed to have protective and beautifying properties. But more than that, it is a social practice that gathers women together, that transmits knowledge from older to younger, that turns the body into a site of collective attention. The designs require skill and patience. The paste must be applied carefully and allowed to dry. The longer it remains on the skin, the darker the stain. The hennaed woman must wait, still and attentive, while the mark sets. This waiting is part of

the ritual. It slows time. It makes beauty something that cannot be rushed.

What matters here is not just the aesthetic outcome but the process. The application of henna is an act of care: one woman tending to another's body, making it beautiful for a significant occasion. And because henna fades—because the mark is temporary, lasting only a few weeks—there is no illusion of permanence. The mark acknowledges its own transience. It says: beauty is fleeting, and that is why we must make it again and again. The temporariness is not a limitation. It is a feature. It insists that care must be ongoing, that the world does not maintain itself without repeated effort.

Now to the threshold itself; the space where the human and the non-human meet, where the domestic and the cosmic intersect. In many Sudanese contexts, thresholds are sites of power and vulnerability. The entrance to a home —the doorway between rooms, the boundary between inside and outside—these are places where protection is needed. And so they are marked. Not always visibly, but marked nonetheless.

This is where we encounter the talismanic: amulets, prayers written on paper and folded into leather pouches, Quranic verses inscribed and worn on the body, objects placed at doorways, gestures performed at certain times. The Western secular gaze often struggles here. It wants to categorize these practices as "superstition" and move on. But this dismissal reveals more about the limits of secular thought than about the practices themselves. What the talismanic acknowledges is that human life is not sovereign. It is subject to forces—illness, envy, misfortune, spiritual disturbance—that cannot be fully controlled.

The talismanic is an attempt to negotiate with those forces, to manage fear without surrendering to despair.

Consider the *Hijab,* not the headscarf, but the small leather pouch containing written prayers or Quranic verses, worn on the body or hung in the home. These objects are common throughout the Islamic world, including Sudan. They are made by religious specialists who have knowledge of which verses offer protection against which dangers.

The writing itself is sacred: the ink, the paper, the script. The object is then enclosed, kept close, treated with reverence. Whether you believe it "works" in a metaphysical sense is less important than understanding what it does socially and psychologically.

It externalizes care. It makes protection visible and tangible. It gives people something to hold onto when the world feels precarious. And the world, in Sudan, has often been precarious. Drought, famine, disease, conflict, displacement—these are not abstractions. They are lived realities that have shaped Sudanese life for generations.

In such conditions, the desire for protection is not irrational. It is deeply human. The talismanic acknowledges that there are limits to what individuals can control, and it provides a technology for managing that helplessness. It is a way of saying: I am doing what I can. I am not passive. I am taking action, even if that action is symbolic.

This brings us to the unseen, and to animals. Then totem. The word itself is hazardous, because it carries the colonial tone of anthropology: the outsider naming the sacred in order to classify it.

But we can still speak carefully of animal symbolism, not as quaint folklore, but as cosmological relation. In many Sudanese and Nilotic contexts, animals are not "symbols" in the Western sense, stand-ins for abstract ideas. They are

neighbors in a shared ecology. They are sources of food, labor, danger, protection, and spiritual resonance. Cattle, birds, river creatures, desert animals, these are not decorative motifs. They are lived presences.

When animals appear in visual form, they often carry the weight of intimacy: the sense that human life is not autonomous, not separate, not sovereign. It depends. It is entangled. The animal becomes a reminder that the world does not revolve around human language.

Among pastoral groups like the Dinka and Nuer, cattle are central, not just economically but cosmologically. A man's relationship to his cattle is profound: he knows each animal individually, names them, sings to them, grieves when they die. Cattle provide milk, meat, leather, dung for fuel and building. But they are also markers of wealth, vehicles for social transactions like marriage, and objects of spiritual significance. Cattle imagery appears in songs, in body decoration, in the way young men style their hair to resemble cattle horns. This is not metaphor. It is an acknowledgment that human identity is shaped by relationships with non-human beings.

Birds, too, carry significance. The hoopoe, the crane, the dove, these appear in folktales, in proverbs, in decorative motifs. Birds are messengers, travelers between earth and sky, figures of freedom and fragility.

In a landscape as vast and open as Sudan's, where the sky is a constant presence, birds become natural symbols of the soul's movement, of aspiration, of the precariousness of flight. But again, this is not purely symbolic. Birds are real. They migrate, they feed, they nest, they die. Their presence in human thought reflects an attentiveness to the actual world, not an escape into abstraction.

And this is where the unseen enters again, not as superstition, but as a dimension of lived reality. The Sudanese archive is full of protective intelligence: amulets, talismanic papers, marks placed on thresholds, objects carried on the body, gestures repeated at certain times, ritual practices meant to manage illness, envy, misfortune, and spiritual disturbance.

The modern secular mind often mocks these practices because it thinks knowledge is only what can be proven in laboratories. But even if one insists on secular explanation, these practices still reveal something crucial: they are systems of care. They are ways of managing fear without surrendering to despair. They are attempts to negotiate the limits of control in a world that frequently reminds you how little you command.To dismiss that is to dismiss the human. It is also to misunderstand art. Because art, at its deepest, has always been bound to the question of helplessness.

Some cultures answered with theology. Some with philosophy. Some with empire.

Sudan, often, answered with marks, marks that made protection visible, made continuity tangible, made belonging legible, made the unseen negotiable.

At this stage, the careful reader may feel uneasy. They may fear we are drifting into mysticism. Let them.

The unease is instructive. It reveals how modernity trains us to trust only what is loud, official, and legible. But Sudanese aesthetic intelligence often lived precisely in what was unofficial, quiet, and relational. It lived in the home, in the threshold, in the body, in the hand. It lived in women's practices as much as in men's monuments. It lived in what was transmitted through doing rather than through claiming.

This is why we must resist the impulse to elevate only certain

forms of Sudanese art—the monumental, the authored, the collectible—while ignoring the rest. The museum loves what it can frame. It struggles with what is ephemeral, embodied, collective, and domestic.

But the majority of Sudanese aesthetic production has always happened in those dismissed spaces. Women sitting together, applying henna. An elder teaching a young person how to weave a basket. A potter repairing a cracked vessel. A woman embroidering a *Thoub*. These are not minor activities. They are the foundation of aesthetic life. And they have been systematically undervalued because they are associated with women, with craft, with function, with the everyday.

What would it mean to take them seriously? It would mean acknowledging that a perfectly applied henna pattern is as significant as a painting. It would mean understanding that the skill required to weave an intricate textile pattern is as demanding as sculpture. It would mean recognizing that the knowledge embedded in these practices—passed down through generations, adapted to changing circumstances, maintained despite immense pressures—constitutes an archive as important as any written text.

And now we must make a crucial distinction: marks can protect, but marks can also be forced. Not every inscription is chosen. Some scar is violence. Some pattern is imposed. Some bodily modification happens under coercion or social pressure. A custodial book cannot romanticize. It must remain morally awake. So the ethic here is not to celebrate every mark as beautiful, but to understand why marking became central in the first place: because unmarked life, in many conditions, is vulnerable to erasure. The desire to be inscribed is often the desire not to disappear.

This ethical complexity is especially important when we consider children. Many scarification practices were performed on young people who had no real choice in the matter. Parents made decisions on behalf of their children, based on cultural norms and social pressures. Some adults who underwent scarification as children speak of it with regret. Others with pride. Some with both.

The truth is that cultural practices are never simply liberatory or simply oppressive. They are both, simultaneously, and the work of a custodial stance is to hold that complexity without collapsing it into easy judgments.

What we can say is this: the decline of facial scarification in Sudan is, for many, a relief. It represents a loosening of social pressures, an expansion of choice, a world in which people can decide for themselves how they want their bodies to appear. But the decline also represents a loss, not necessarily of the practice itself, but of the social worlds that practice sustained.

When scarification disappears, so do the rituals around it, the songs, the knowledge of healing, the intergenerational transmission. Something is gained, something is lost. This is the nature of change.

That desire becomes even more poignant when we remember Sudan's long history of being misnamed by others—Arabized here, Africanized there, "peripheral" everywhere. In such a world, the local mark becomes an act of sovereignty. It says: we name ourselves. We keep our own codes. We carry our own archive on skin, cloth, and clay. We do not require external recognition to be real. The mark becomes a refusal of epistemic colonization. It becomes a way of preserving a world that outsiders would rather simplify.

This is what outsiders often miss: the way aesthetic choices

in Sudan have been shaped by the experience of being misread, misrepresented, and marginalized. Colonial ethnographers arrived with their cameras and their categories, eager to document "primitive" practices before they vanished. They photographed scarified bodies as evidence of "tribal" culture, stripping those bodies of context, of dignity, of complexity. Those photographs then circulated in museums and textbooks, becoming the basis for how the world understood Sudan. The people in the photographs became specimens. Their marks became data.

Against this history, the act of maintaining one's own aesthetic practices—on one's own terms, in one's own contexts—becomes an act of resistance. It says: you do not get to define us. You do not get to turn our lives into your archive. We will keep our marks, our patterns, our totems, and we will decide what they mean. We will transmit them to our children or we will let them fade, but either way, it will be our decision.

This is why the question of who gets to interpret Sudanese aesthetics is not a trivial one. When Western scholars and curators approach Sudanese objects, they bring assumptions. They assume that visual forms can be read like texts, that meaning is stable, that the observer's interpretation is as valid as the maker's intention.

But what if the mark is not meant for you? What if its meaning is deliberately opaque to outsiders? What if part of its function is precisely to create boundaries, to signal belonging to those who know and exclusion to those who don't?

The custodial posture acknowledges these limits. It says: I can describe what I see, but I cannot claim to know what it means from the inside. I can offer context, but I cannot provide certainty. I can hold the object with respect, but I cannot possess its significance. This humility is not weakness. It is epistemological

maturity. It is the recognition that not everything is legible to everyone, and that illegibility is sometimes protective.

So let this chapter end with an ethical instruction for the rest of the book: when you encounter a Sudanese pattern, do not rush to treat it as mere design. When you encounter a scar, do not turn it into spectacle. When you encounter an animal motif, do not reduce it to metaphor.

Ask instead what it protected, what it preserved, what it transmitted, what it kept intact. Because in Sudan's aesthetic history, beauty has often been a form of care, care made visible, care made durable, care made repeatable.

Let the record show: Sudan's marks were never merely aesthetic choices. They were survival architectures—inscriptions against disappearance, patterns against chaos, and quiet totems reminding the human that the world is larger than its explanations. They were ways of saying: we are here. We persist. We remember. And we will continue to make marks, even when the world tries to erase us, because marking is how we prove that we were not merely passing through.

We were present. We mattered. We made something that lasted.

4

The Lens of Aftermath: Art After the Border Was Drawn

Sudanese art, once empire arrives, is forced to learn a new grammar: the grammar of fracture. Not the honest fracture of nature—drought, flood, migration, seasons—but the bureaucratic fracture of power: lines drawn by hands that will never carry water, names assigned by mouths that will never speak the local tongue with tenderness, and categories enforced by offices that treat living people like administrative problems. The border is not merely a line on a map. It is an instruction written onto the imagination: this is where you end, this is where you begin, this is what you are allowed to be. Every Sudanese brushstroke after this moment carries an invisible pressure, the pressure of being seen through someone else's lens, of being measured by someone else's criteria, of being asked to "develop" into an ideal that was never born from your own soil.

Rupture is what happens when a culture is forced to translate itself while under surveillance. The colonial project did not only seize land and resources; it reorganized time. It rearranged the past into "primitive," the present into "backward," and the

future into "civilized"—a future that always looked suspiciously like the colonizer's mirror.

This is how imagination is colonized: not by banning every form outright, but by humiliating what already exists, by teaching a people to doubt the dignity of their own forms, by turning inherited aesthetics into superstition and imported aesthetics into aspiration. You can steal a country's imagination without ever burning a painting if you successfully convince the people that their own visual language is unworthy of seriousness.

The Anglo-Egyptian period and the broader colonial and post-colonial administrative reality around it introduced a particular kind of aesthetic violence: the violence of institutional taste. It wasn't only censorship in the dramatic sense, though censorship matters, and punishment matters, and fear matters. It was the quieter disciplining of what counted as "art," what counted as "education," what counted as "culture." An institution does not need to shout to control you; it can simply decide what gets funded, what gets displayed, what gets taught, what gets archived.

It can decide which forms are "craft," which are "fine art," which are "heritage," which are "primitive," which are "modern." These labels appear neutral. They are not. They are weapons with clean hands.

The condominium agreement of 1899 established a curious fiction: that sovereignty was shared between Britain and Egypt. In practice, this meant British control masked by Egyptian participation. But the fiction mattered aesthetically because it created a double alienation. Sudanese were governed by the British but through Egyptian intermediaries.

They were subjects of an empire that pretended not to be one. This duplicity entered the aesthetic realm as a kind of enforced

multilingualism: to be legible to power, you had to speak in registers that were foreign twice over, once to the British, once to the Egyptians. Your own visual language, your own aesthetic priorities were rendered irrelevant to the mechanisms that distributed resources, recognition, and institutional validation.

And so Sudanese art after the border is drawn becomes a work of double survival. First, it must survive the material consequences of empire, extraction, displacement, economic reorderings, the rearrangement of labor and education. Second, it must survive the psyche consequences: the internalized whisper that says, your forms are not enough; your symbols are not sophisticated; your beauty is not legitimate until someone else applauds it.

That whisper is perhaps the most enduring colonization, because it outlives the colonizer. It becomes a voice inside the artist's own mind. It is why so many postcolonial art histories are not simply histories of invention, but histories of negotiation: negotiation with inherited forms, negotiation with imported modernities, negotiation with the gaze that demands "African authenticity" one day and "global contemporaneity" the next.

Consider what it meant for a young Sudanese person in the early twentieth century to learn "art" in a colonial school. Art education, as introduced by the British, was not neutral pedagogy. It was cultural evangelism. It taught that painting meant easel painting, that sculpture meant figurative representation in bronze or stone, that beauty meant European academic standards, that progress meant abandoning local aesthetic traditions in favor of imported techniques. The School of Design, opened in 1947 at Gordon Memorial College, was the site where this pedagogy took institutional form. It was also, paradoxically,

the site where resistance would eventually crystallize, because once you teach people the colonizer's language, they can use it against you.

But before that resistance, there was adaptation. There was the slow, often painful process of Sudanese artists learning to navigate between worlds. Some embraced Western techniques wholeheartedly, hoping to prove that Sudanese could achieve excellence in any medium.

Others maintained fierce loyalty to local forms, refusing the colonizer's categories altogether. Most inhabited the uncomfortable middle: learning European methods while trying to preserve something of their own aesthetic inheritance, code-switching between visual languages depending on context and audience.

Rupture, then, is not only political. It is aesthetic. It splits the archive into categories that do not belong together, and it forces the artist to choose between them as though choice were freedom. But the truth is harsher: the artist often chooses under pressure, under scarcity, under the threat of misrecognition.

Some artists respond by embracing imported forms, hoping to enter global intelligibility. Some respond by intensifying local forms, turning tradition into a fortified identity. Many respond by doing something subtler: encoding.

They build works that can speak in two registers at once, legible enough to survive institutional scrutiny, local enough to remain faithful to the soil. This is where Sudanese pattern becomes a political instrument without losing its ancient dignity, where abstraction becomes a safehouse, where metaphor becomes the language of the living.

The policy of divide and conquer left aesthetic traces. When the British formally separated north and south in 1924, they

were not simply creating administrative districts. They were fracturing a cultural continuum. They were deciding which forms would be classified as "Islamic," which as "African," which as "Arab," which as "tribal."

These categories hardened into institutional reality through museums, through ethnographic surveys, through educational curricula. A Dinka mask and a Khartoum textile, both produced within the territory called Sudan, would be filed into different conceptual universes—one "tribal art," the other "Islamic craft"—as though they did not share a sky.

This fracture entered the consciousness of Sudanese artists as a question: what does it mean to be Sudanese? The question was not abstract. It was existential.

If your country is defined by a border imposed from outside, if your identity categories are assigned by administrators who know nothing of your lineage, if your aesthetic traditions are classified according to someone else's taxonomy, then making art becomes an act of self-definition against imposed definitions. It becomes a refusal of the categories that would simplify you into manageability. Colonial censorship rarely operates like a villain in a novel. It operates like an administrator. It asks for permits. It controls printing. It shapes curricula. It punishes certain gatherings, it regulates public speech, it trains communities to self-censor so thoroughly that direct testimony becomes reckless. Under these conditions, art does not vanish. It mutates, it learns to be indirect without becoming vague. It learns to carry pain without naming it. It learns to build a world inside itself because the public world is unsafe. This is why, in Sudan, silence is not a lack of content. Silence is a strategy, an intelligence, a protection mechanism refined over generations.

When a people learns that speech can get you killed, beauty

becomes a quieter way of telling the truth.

But we must be careful not to romanticize this either. Encoding is not merely cleverness; it is evidence of constraint. It is what happens when directness is punished. A coded artwork is often a work made under duress, even if it is beautiful. So the lens of rupture asks us to read beauty with moral alertness. When we encounter elegance, we must ask: was elegance chosen freely, or was it demanded by danger?

When we encounter abstraction, we must ask: is this a modernist preference, or a survival tactic? The same formal decision can be both. The ethical reader does not rush to decide. The ethical reader stays long enough to feel the weight of what might have been impossible to say out loud.

Think about what it means to make art in a context where your exhibitions can be shut down, your teaching positions revoked, your very presence in the capital city questioned. This was not hypothetical. Throughout the colonial period and into independence, Sudanese artists navigated a landscape where cultural production was always potentially political, where any assertion of Sudanese identity could be read as anti-colonial agitation, where the simple act of painting in a style that referenced local traditions rather than European academicism could be interpreted as resistance.

Rupture also changes the relationship between the artist and the audience. In a culture shaped by surveillance and political volatility, the audience itself becomes complex. There is the local audience, which may recognize the code. There is the institutional audience, which may pretend not to recognize it, or may punish it if it does. There is the foreign audience, which may exoticize it, or demand that it perform "Sudanness" in a way that reduces it to trauma and sand. The artist stands at the

intersection of these gazes, and the work becomes a negotiation between them.

This is not a comfortable place to create from. It produces a particular tension in Sudanese art: the tension between the need to remain truthful and the need to remain safe; between the desire to speak and the necessity of restraint; between fidelity to the local and the hunger for international platforms that may offer resources but also distortions.

And then there is the border itself as an artifact of the psyche. A border is a form of forced storytelling. It tells you that your history is now segmented. It tells you that your relations across land are now "foreign." It tells you that movement that was once ordinary is now suspicious. It tells you that kinship is now subject to paperwork. These changes do not remain at the level of politics. They enter the aesthetic. They create an art of fragmentation: not fragmentation as avant-garde play, but fragmentation as lived reality. When movement is disrupted, the archive becomes discontinuous.

When families are displaced, memory becomes portable. When identities are politicized, self-description becomes dangerous. The artwork, under these conditions, becomes a site where continuity can be reassembled, or at least mourned.

Consider the Gezira Scheme, launched in 1925: a massive irrigation project that transformed land between the Blue and White Niles into cotton plantations for British textile mills. This was economic extraction, yes. But it was also aesthetic extraction. It changed the relationship between people and land, turning agricultural labor into industrial production. It created new class formations, new patterns of migration, new forms of dependency. And it severed older aesthetic practices tied to seasonal rhythms and communal agriculture.

When you reorganize how people relate to land, you reorganize what beauty can mean.

This is why Sudanese art after rupture often feels haunted even when it is vibrant. It carries the afterimage of what was interrupted. It carries the grief of what could not continue. It carries the fatigue of being forced to define oneself repeatedly for others. The colonizer's question "who are you?" is not innocent. It is a demand for legibility, and legibility is often a precondition for control.

To answer that question too eagerly is to enter the colonizer's game. Many Sudanese works respond by refusing the terms of the question. They do not provide identity as a neat package. They provide presence. They provide texture. They provide a world that cannot be simplified without violence.

Rupture also fractures the hierarchy of forms. Under colonial regimes and their afterlives, certain forms are elevated and others are diminished. "Fine art" is celebrated in ways that align with European models, while local craft traditions are relegated to ethnography. The museum and the anthropology archive become twin instruments of classification: one granting prestige, the other granting curiosity. Both can be violent. Prestige can be violent when it demands assimilation. Curiosity can be violent when it treats a culture as specimen.

Sudanese aesthetic life, which historically did not separate art from life so sharply, is forced into this hierarchy, and the result is a kind of institutional amputation: living traditions are extracted from their contexts and displayed as "heritage," while contemporary works are pressured to perform "modernity" according to imported terms.

The lens of rupture insists that we treat this hierarchy as suspect. It asks us to see that what was called "craft" was

often where the deepest aesthetic intelligence lived, precisely because it remained tied to continuity, labor, and communal transmission. It asks us to see that what was called "modern" was often not purely invention but negotiation with the colonizer's standards. And it asks us to see that what was called "traditional" was not static but adaptive, an evolving language that changed to survive. Colonial power loves to freeze the colonized into timelessness, because timelessness is easier to control than a living, changing culture. Sudanese art refuses that freezing, even when it is forced into museums and textbooks that pretend to categorize it cleanly.

Women's aesthetic labor deserves particular attention here. Throughout the colonial period, women maintained practices—textile work, henna application, basketry, pottery, body adornment—that carried aesthetic knowledge across generations. These practices were systematically devalued by colonial administrators and their taxonomies. They were "domestic," "decorative," "craft," never "art." Yet they were the practices that maintained cultural continuity when institutions failed. They were the practices that encoded memory when official archives excluded Sudanese voices. They were the practices that transmitted pattern, color theory, compositional sophistication, without needing museums or galleries.

To dismiss women's aesthetic labor as "merely craft" is to accept the colonizer's hierarchy. It is to agree that what happens in institutional spaces matters more than what happens in homes. It is to privilege the authored object over the communally maintained tradition. The lens of rupture asks us to reverse this priority: to recognize that in contexts where institutions are colonial impositions, the unofficial, the domestic, the feminine

often carry the most authentic continuities.

There is another wound inside the rupture: the fracture of the imagination itself. Colonialism is often discussed as a political and economic project, but its deepest aim is spiritual: to reshape what a people believes is possible. When you control education, you control aspiration. When you control public narrative, you control dignity. When you control the archive, you control what can be remembered without shame. Sudanese artists working under and after these regimes were not merely responding to external control; they were also battling internalized diminishment. To make work at all under such conditions is already an act of resistance. To make work that remains faithful to the soil while speaking to modern conditions is a rarer courage.

But then came independence in 1956, and with it, a new question: what does Sudanese art become when the colonizer leaves but the colonial structures remain? This is where the Khartoum School emerges as both achievement and complication. The School—founded by Ibrahim El-Salahi, Ahmed Mohammed Shibrain, Osman Waqialla, and others in the late 1950s and early 1960s—represents the first major effort to articulate a distinctly Sudanese modernism.

These artists had been trained in colonial institutions. They knew European techniques. But they also knew Sudanese traditions: Arabic calligraphy, Nubian motifs, Islamic geometry, African patterns. Their project was synthesis: to create a visual language that could be recognizably Sudanese while engaging with international modernism. This was delicate work. To emphasize local traditions too heavily risked being dismissed as "ethnic art" or "heritage"—categories that denied contemporaneity. To embrace international modernism too fully risked losing connection to the soil.

The Khartoum School artists walked this line with sophisticated intelligence. El-Salahi's paintings combined calligraphic elements with abstraction. Shibrain developed a visual language based on Arabic letterforms distilled into pure design.

Waqialla explored Sudanese-Kufi calligraphy as modern graphic form. These were not nostalgic gestures. They were assertions that Sudanese aesthetic traditions could be as legitimate a foundation for modernism as European ones.

The name "Khartoum School" itself was coined by Denis Williams, an Anglo-Guyanese artist teaching at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in the late 1950s. Williams recognized something distinctive happening: a group of artists who shared not a rigid manifesto but a sensibility, a commitment to expressing Sudanese identity through forms that respected both local heritage and contemporary innovation. The fact that the name came from an outsider is telling, it suggests how much Sudanese artists were still operating within frameworks of external validation, still needing foreign recognition to legitimate their work.

And this is where the encoded resistance that appears not as slogans but as structure. In Sudan, resistance often wears the mask of patience. It is not always loud. Sometimes it is a refusal to abandon a motif. Sometimes it is the insistence on a certain palette tied to place. Sometimes it is the preservation of a rhythm that survives despite institutional pressure. Sometimes it is the very act of continuing to make, to weave, to draw, to inscribe, when the world is trying to reduce you to a crisis statistic. Colonial and postcolonial violences produce a certain hunger in outsiders: the hunger for "political art" that can be easily read, easily cited, easily turned into moral performance. Sudanese art often refuses that hunger. It resists not only

oppression, but also the foreign appetite for legible suffering.

Think about what El-Salahi's "Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams" (1961) accomplishes. On first viewing, it appears abstract: monochromatic forms, calligraphic gestures, geometric structures. But look closer and you see references to Sudanese visual culture, mask-like faces, pattern systems, spatial arrangements that echo domestic architecture. The painting is modern without rejecting tradition, abstract without losing specificity. It speaks to international audiences while remaining rooted in local knowledge. This is encoding at its most sophisticated: the work appears legible in multiple visual languages simultaneously, and the viewer you are determines which language you hear.

The Khartoum School's achievement was real. For the first time, Sudanese artists gained international recognition not as exotic curiosities but as serious contributors to modern art. El-Salahi would eventually have a retrospective at Tate Modern, the first African artist so honored. But the School also reveals the persistence of colonial frameworks. These artists succeeded, in part, by translating Sudanese aesthetics into forms legible to European-trained eyes. They worked within gallery systems, museum structures, critical discourses that were all imported.

The very category "Sudanese modernism" accepts European modernism as the standard against which Sudanese contributions are measured. And then the School fractured. In 1975, it effectively disbanded. Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq broke away to found the Crystalist Group, which rejected what they saw as the Khartoum School's alignment with post-independence government ideologies.

El-Salahi was accused of anti-government activities and imprisoned by the Nimeiri regime, later going into self-imposed

exile in the UK. The fragmentation was not merely personal or aesthetic. It reflected deeper tensions about what Sudanese art should be, whom it should serve, how it should navigate between local and global, between political engagement and aesthetic autonomy.

The Crystalist Group's manifesto—published in Al-Ayyam newspaper in 1976—argued that the world is like a crystal: transparent, with interdependent components. They rejected singular objective truth in favor of multiple truths intertwined with perception, feeling, and pleasure. This was radical in Sudan's political context. It was a refusal of didactic art, of propaganda, of nationalist simplification. It was an insistence that art could be playful, exploratory, subjective—that beauty need not justify itself through political utility. But this too was a form of encoding. To argue for aesthetic freedom in an authoritarian context is itself political. To insist that art serves no master is to resist the state's demand that culture legitimize power.

The Crystalists understood this. Their work appeared abstract, decorative even. But abstraction, in a surveillance state, is a form of protection. You cannot be punished for what you have not explicitly said. This refusal is itself a form of sovereignty. It says: we will not become content for your conscience. We will not perform our wounds on demand. We will carry them in our own languages, at our own volume, with our own ethics. This is why Sudanese beauty can be so disciplined. It is beauty that has learned not to trust the spectator. It is beauty that has learned that visibility can be dangerous. It is beauty that has learned to survive without applause.

Throughout this period, certain artists maintained practices outside institutional recognition altogether. Self-taught

painters like Ali Osman and Ahmed Salim developed visual languages without formal training, working in styles that combined local iconography with personal vision. Their work often circulated in contexts far from galleries and museums, in homes, in markets, in community spaces.

This parallel aesthetic economy mattered precisely because it refused institutional validation. It said: we make beauty for ourselves, not for your approval.

Women artists faced particular challenges. Even within progressive movements like the Khartoum School, gendered assumptions about who could be a "serious" artist persisted. Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, one of the few women to gain recognition, had to fight for legitimacy in ways her male colleagues did not. Her work—often addressing women's experiences, domestic spaces, bodily autonomy—was sometimes dismissed as "feminine" rather than "universal." This gendered rupture within the aesthetic rupture reveals how colonialism's hierarchies reproduced themselves even in anticolonial movements.

The lens of rupture, then, is not a lens of despair. It is a lens of diagnostic clarity. It teaches us to see the border not merely as history, but as an ongoing aesthetic condition. It teaches us to suspect the categories we inherited from empires and institutions. It teaches us to read silence as intelligence, abstraction as shelter, pattern as code, continuity as defiance. It also teaches us to be humble: to admit that we will not always decode what we see, and that decoding is not the highest form of respect.

Sometimes the highest respect is to recognize the existence of a code and not demand its keys.

Consider the archive itself as a site of rupture. Colonial administrators photographed, catalogued, collected Sudanese

objects and practices. These became the "Sudanese archive" in European museums and research institutions. But this archive is structured by violence. It contains what was stolen, what was purchased under duress, what was extracted without consent. It contains photographs of scarified bodies presented as ethnographic data, with no record of the people's names, stories, or consent.

It contains textiles ripped from ritual contexts and displayed as "decorative arts." The archive appears objective, scientific, preservationist. But it is theft organized as knowledge.

Against this colonial archive, Sudanese artists have had to build alternative archives. Oral traditions that refuse written codification. Practices that live only in transmission from body to body. Visual languages that cannot be translated into museum labels. These counter-archives are deliberately ephemeral, deliberately resistant to extraction. They survive precisely by refusing to be captured. And yet, the tension persists: how to preserve without playing into preservation's colonial history? How to document without reproducing the violence of documentation? How to make Sudanese aesthetic traditions accessible to younger generations without turning them into museum pieces?

These questions have no easy answers. They are the questions that artists after rupture must live with.

If Chapter 1 showed that Sudan's earliest aesthetic life was a complete world, and Chapter 2 showed that the environment itself trained the eye, then this chapter reveals what happens when an external power attempts to overwrite that training with administrative narratives. The work does not disappear. It becomes double. It becomes guarded. It becomes haunted. It becomes cunning. It becomes careful. It becomes, in the deepest

sense, a scar, because the scar is not the wound, but the proof that the wound did not finish you.

And so, as we move forward, hold this as doctrine: rupture is not an event that ended when flags changed. It is a pressure that continues whenever Sudanese art is asked to justify itself in the language of others. It continues whenever "authenticity" is demanded like a performance.

It continues whenever "modernity" is defined as resemblance to Europe. It continues whenever institutions treat Sudan as a theme rather than a living complexity. The critic who approaches Sudanese art must therefore be more than appreciative.

They must be vigilant. They must see the border not as a line on a map, but as a line drawn across the imagination, and they must learn to read what survives on either side of it without forcing it to become simple.

Let the record show: after the border was drawn, Sudanese art did not become merely political. It became morally intelligent—learning how to speak under pressure, how to remain beautiful without becoming decorative, and how to survive the most subtle violence of all: being made legible only in someone else's terms.

5

The Lens of Erasure: When Civilizing Became a Curriculum

The most effective empire doesn't merely take land. It takes your capacity to believe in your own forms. It doesn't need to burn every archive if it can teach you to feel embarrassed by what you inherited.

That is the true meaning of "civilizing missions"—not the crude spectacle of conquest, but the slower, administrative seduction of shame. In Sudan, the violence of "civilizing" was often performed with paperwork, pedagogy, and polite language. It arrived as improvement. It arrived as instruction. It arrived as a promise to make the world more legible, more ordered, more modern. And it did what all such promises do when they are attached to power: it made the local feel secondary, the inherited feel suspect, and the indigenous feel like a superstition that must be outgrown.

There is a particular cruelty in the way institutions weaponize taste. Taste, when honest, is intimate, an accumulation of place, memory, climate, and communal rhythm. But taste, when institutionalized, becomes a leash. It teaches people

what to admire and what to dismiss, and it does so under the cover of "standards." The colonial apparatus was not only a system of extraction; it was a school of perception. It taught which forms deserved seriousness and which belonged to the realm of "craft," "custom," "folk," "ritual," "tribal." These labels were not innocent. They created a hierarchy of legitimacy. They positioned European-derived "fine art" as the endpoint of aesthetic evolution and positioned local practices as raw material, interesting, perhaps, but not quite art in the way the colonizer meant it. A culture can survive war and still be undone by classification. Because classification, when enforced, is an aesthetic form of dispossession.

This is why I call it erasure as curriculum. Not erasure as absence, but erasure as training. To be trained into erasure is not to forget your past outright; it is to learn to mistrust it. It is to learn to look at your own forms with a foreign eye, to judge them by foreign standards, and to internalize the sense that your inheritance is incomplete unless it can be translated into the dominant aesthetic language of power.

The tragedy is not simply that certain practices were discouraged or banned; it is that a new generation learns to inherit with embarrassment. It learns to treat continuity as backwardness. It learns to treat ancestral intelligence as a museum artifact rather than a living system. The colonizer's deepest victory is achieved when the colonized begins to perform the colonizer's contempt without needing to be asked.

Education, in this story, is never neutral. The classroom becomes a border checkpoint for the imagination. It decides which images are worthy of attention and which are dismissed as decorative noise. It decides which histories count as "civilization" and which are treated as preface. It decides what

the student is trained to want. And wanting is not a small matter. If you can train a people to want what resembles the conqueror, you don't need to police them forever. They will police themselves with aspiration. They will pursue the imported as sophistication. They will treat the local as the thing one must transcend. This is why "civilizing" is such an elegant word for violence: it makes domination sound like mentorship. It turns theft into pedagogy.

Consider the mechanics. Gordon Memorial College was founded in 1902 as part of an educational project championed by Lord Kitchener, named after a British general killed during the fall of Khartoum in 1885. The symbolism is instructive: an institution designed to educate Sudanese was named for a colonial military officer.

The message was clear before a single student entered: this building represents not your victory, but ours. This is where you will learn what we decide you need to know. The curriculum was conceived to meet the colonial administration's requirements. Primary students learned reading, writing, arithmetic—but always in service of creating subordinate administrators for the colonial state. The student body grew steadily through the early decades—hundreds of young men entering a building named for the man colonialism had martyred.

And as it grew, the curriculum expanded: religious law, engineering, teacher training, clerical administration, accounting. Notice what is absent. Nothing that would produce independent thought, independent vision, independent aesthetic judgment. These were not neutral educational offerings. They were training programs designed to produce a class of intermediaries, Sudanese who could staff the lower and middle ranks of colonial bureaucracy, who could translate between rulers and ruled, who

could manage the mechanics of extraction and administration without requiring British personnel at every level.

What it produced, as intended, was a class of educated Sudanese men reshaped away from indigenous frameworks—intermediaries fluent enough in colonial logic to staff its machinery, and sufficiently alienated from local authority to remain reliably useful. This was not an accidental side effect. It was the point.

Colonial education creates a particular kind of subject: someone who speaks the language of power, who understands the colonizer's categories, who has internalized the colonizer's hierarchies of value. This person becomes useful precisely because they are alienated from their own context. They can see their own culture through foreign eyes. They can assess local practices by imported standards. They become, in the deepest sense, translators—but translation is never innocent. Every translation is also a betrayal.

The mechanisms of this violence are often subtle enough that they can be denied. The institution says, "We simply offered education." The administrator says, "We simply introduced standards." The museum says, "We simply preserved artifacts." But preservation can be a form of freezing, and freezing can be a form of death. When local forms are preserved as ethnography—flattened into timeless "tradition"—they are denied their right to evolve. They are separated from their contexts, displayed under glass, and admired as "heritage," while living artists are pressured to prove their modernity by abandoning the very continuities that made their culture coherent. This is a double erasure: the old is fossilized, the new is assimilated. The living bridge between them is weakened.

The result is a culture forced to choose between nostalgia

and imitation, between being "authentically local" for the foreign gaze or "properly modern" for institutional recognition. Both choices are traps. Both are forms of control disguised as opportunity.

On the eve of independence—as if anticipating the need to fix, in amber, the image of what Sudan was supposed to be—the colonial administration institutionalized its vision of Sudanese culture as ethnographic specimen. A museum branch, opened in the closing hours of foreign rule, as if to say: *we may leave the land, but we leave behind our way of seeing it.* The timing was not incidental. The colonizers institutionalized a particular way of seeing Sudanese culture—as ethnography, as specimens, as objects to be collected and displayed rather than as living practices embedded in ongoing social worlds.

The Museum of Antiquities, established at Gordon Memorial College around 1905 by Reginald Wingate, extended this logic: its collections were configured for scholarly investigation rather than public encounter. Sudanese cultural objects became data—not living inheritance, not sources of meaning for the communities who had made them, but specimens held under institutional custody. This elite access reveals the colonial attitude: Sudanese cultural objects were data for scholarly investigation, not sources of meaning for the communities that produced them.

The violence here is epistemological. It determines who gets to know, and how. It determines whose interpretation matters.

When Sudanese objects are collected by British administrators, catalogued by European-trained scholars, displayed in institutional settings designed for foreign consumption, and interpreted through colonial frameworks, the objects are severed from the people who made them. They become evidence

in someone else's argument about civilization, about progress, about the stages of human development. The craftsperson who wove the basket, the woman who shaped the pot, the community that used the talisman—these people have no voice in how their work is understood. They are rendered mute. Their objects speak, but only in languages imposed by others. What is erased, in such a system, is not only content, it is confidence. The artist begins to doubt their own visual language. The critic begins to treat imported frameworks as more legitimate than local ones. The audience begins to mistrust what is familiar. This is a psychological occupation. It does not require soldiers. It requires curricula, funding patterns, exhibition standards, and the quiet authority of those who decide what gets called "serious." Once seriousness is monopolized, the rest of culture becomes a decorative annex. And a decorative annex is the easiest thing in the world to disregard when the politics become violent.

Think about what it means for a young Sudanese artist in the 1940s or 1950s to encounter this institutional apparatus. They might grow up surrounded by textiles with geometric patterns, by henna designs with complex symmetries, by architectural forms that manage light and heat with elegant efficiency. But when they enter Gordon Memorial College's School of Design (established 1945), what do they learn? They learn European academic drawing. They learn perspective systems developed in Renaissance Italy. They learn color theory as articulated by German scientists. They learn that "art" means easel painting, that "sculpture" means carved stone or cast bronze, that "composition" follows Western principles of balance and harmony.

None of this knowledge is inherently violent. Perspective can be useful. Color theory can illuminate.

Bronze casting is a legitimate skill. The violence lies in what is excluded, in what is devalued, in what is never mentioned. The violence lies in the implication that these imported techniques represent advancement, while local aesthetic traditions represent a stage you are meant to outgrow. The violence lies in teaching you to see your grandmother's embroidery as "craft" but a European painting as "art," to see your uncle's calligraphy as "decoration" but a Western abstract painting as "serious," to see a Sudanese pattern as "ethnic" but a Parisian design as "universal."

The phrase "civilizing mission" also hides a deeper moral insult: it implies that the people being "civilized" were not already in possession of ethics, beauty, and order. But Sudan, as we have already seen, possessed sophisticated systems of continuity long before modern bureaucracies arrived. The desert taught restraint. The Nile taught rhythm and interconnectedness. The body and the home carried archives of meaning through marks, textiles, and ritual practices that were not random but structured. The colonial project did not introduce order into chaos. It introduced one order by humiliating another. It did not bring morality into amorality. It brought a new moral hierarchy that positioned itself as universal while treating local cosmologies as quaint.

The insult was not simply political; it was metaphysical. It told a people that their ways of knowing the world were childish.

And here we encounter a fundamental aesthetic consequence: when local epistemologies are demeaned, local forms are distorted. If a culture's relationship to the unseen is mocked, its talismanic practices become "superstition" rather than care. If its oral traditions are dismissed, its poetic rhythms become "primitive" rather than sophisticated memory technology. If

its craft lineages are relegated, its most disciplined material intelligence is pushed out of the category of art. Erasure as curriculum is not only the removal of images; it is the removal of the right to interpret one's own images on one's own terms. It is the displacement of the local viewer. It tells the community: you may live here, but you may not be the authority on your own forms. Authority belongs to the institution, the archive, the foreign scholar, the imported canon.

This hierarchical thinking shows up everywhere in colonial documentation. When British administrators collected Sudanese objects, they classified them rigorously: this is "tribal art," this is "Islamic craft," this is "weapons," this is "domestic utensils." These categories appear neutral, merely descriptive. But they are normative. They enforce distinctions that didn't necessarily exist in Sudanese life. A basket might be simultaneously functional, beautiful, and spiritually significant. A textile might be everyday wear, artistic expression, and social marker all at once. But the museum's categories force separation. The basket goes in the "ethnography" collection. The textile becomes "craft." The talisman is filed under "religious objects." Each object is extracted from its web of meanings and reduced to a single function legible to institutional logic.

Moreover, certain types of objects were collected while others were ignored. Colonial interest focused on what appeared exotic, what illustrated difference, what could be used as evidence of "primitive" culture. Elaborate ceremonial objects were collected because they looked dramatic in display cases. Simple, everyday objects that demonstrated sophisticated aesthetic intelligence—a perfectly balanced water vessel, an elegantly efficient cooking implement, a textile with subtle pattern variations—were often overlooked because they didn't perform "difference" dramati-

cally enough for European audiences.

The result is an archive that is systematically skewed. It over-represents the spectacular and under-represents the everyday. It favors objects that conform to European ideas of what "African" or "Islamic" art should look like. It preserves what can be easily classified and discards what is ambiguous, hybrid, or resistant to categorization. This skewed archive then becomes the basis for how the world understands Sudanese aesthetics. Scholars write books based on museum collections. Art historians develop theories based on what colonial administrators chose to preserve. And Sudanese people themselves, trained in institutions that use these colonial archives as authoritative sources, begin to see their own culture through the distortions of colonial classification.

This is where Sudanese art begins to develop its most characteristic modern strategy: not simply resistance, but doubleness. The work learns to wear masks. It learns to speak two languages at once: one for the institution, one for the community. One legible enough to pass through the gate, one faithful enough to remain anchored in soil. The work becomes diplomatic. The artist becomes an interpreter of their own culture for audiences that may not deserve translation, and that translation itself can become exhausting. Because translation is not only linguistic; it is ethical. To translate your culture into the colonizer's categories is to risk mutilating it. Yet to refuse translation can mean invisibility, poverty, and exclusion.

The "civilizing mission" creates this bind deliberately: it makes participation contingent on assimilation, then calls assimilation "progress."

Students at Gordon Memorial College navigated this bind daily. To succeed in the colonial education system required perform-

ing competence in European forms. To maintain connection with Sudanese culture required preserving knowledge that the institution devalued or ignored. Some students managed both. They learned to code-switch between visual languages, producing work that could satisfy colonial examiners while privately maintaining their own aesthetic practices. Others chose sides, fully embracing European modernism and rejecting local traditions as obstacles to progress, or refusing colonial education altogether and remaining within traditional craft lineages.

But most inhabited the uncomfortable middle: learning European methods while trying to preserve something of their own aesthetic inheritance, performing the role of "educated native" while privately resenting the assumptions embedded in that role. This psychological splitting—the experience of having to be two different people in two different contexts—produces a particular kind of consciousness. It makes you acutely aware of how perception is constructed, how standards are arbitrary, how taste is taught.

It also produces exhaustion. The constant negotiation between worlds, the endless code-switching, the vigilance required to perform acceptability while maintaining integrity—these extract a toll.

But there is a more intimate violence still: the violence of admiration. Empire does not only mock; it also collects. It praises certain aspects of the colonized culture, but only those aspects that can be safely aestheticized, stripped of political potency and ethical context.

The colonizer's museum becomes a kind of softened battlefield where objects are displayed as beautiful trophies, divorced from the lives that produced them and from the conditions that

made them necessary. In such cases, appreciation becomes another form of erasure. The object is admired, but the world that gave it meaning is ignored. The pattern is praised, but the hunger it survived is forgotten. The talisman is displayed, but the vulnerability it answered is dismissed as "belief." The textile is aestheticized, but the woman's labor becomes invisible. This is the violence of selective reverence: reverence that loves the surface but refuses the responsibility of the depth.

Colonial photography exemplifies this violence perfectly. British administrators and travelers photographed Sudanese people extensively, particularly those with facial scarification, elaborate dress, or what Europeans considered "exotic" appearance. These photographs were not neutral documentation. They were performances of power. The photographer controlled the frame, the lighting, the pose. The subject often had little say in how they were represented.

These images then circulated in European publications, lectures, exhibitions. Always presented as evidence of something: evidence of "tribal culture," evidence of "primitive conditions," evidence of why colonialism was necessary to bring "progress."

The photographs decontextualized their subjects completely. A person's scarification, which in their own community signified clan membership, passage into adulthood, and social belonging, became evidence of "barbarism" that justified colonial intervention. A woman's jewelry, which represented her family's wealth and her own status, became an example of "native ornament." A man's posture, which in his own cultural context expressed dignity and authority, might be read by European viewers as "noble savage" primitivism. The violence wasn't merely in being photographed, it was in having no control over how those images would be used, interpreted, and

circulated.

So the task of this chapter is to insist on a harsher truth: the civilizing mission was not merely an external intervention; it was a reprogramming of perception. It reshaped what Sudanese people were trained to value. It reshaped what artists were trained to produce. It reshaped what institutions were trained to reward. It built a cultural economy where recognition often required resemblance to foreign forms, and where local continuities were either frozen as folklore or dismissed as backward. This is not a minor issue of taste. It is a spiritual issue, because it determines what a people believes is worthy of devotion.

And this reprogramming was remarkably efficient. By the time of independence in 1956, Sudan had a class of Western-educated elites who had internalized many of the colonizer's aesthetic hierarchies. They valued easel painting over textile work. They valued individual artistic genius over communal craft traditions. They valued innovation and "originality" over continuity and refinement of inherited forms. They valued work that could circulate in international art markets over work that remained embedded in local social contexts.

This internalized hierarchy persisted even among Sudanese who opposed colonialism politically. You could fight for independence while still believing that "real art" meant galleries and museums rather than homes and markets. You could reject British rule while still accepting British definitions of what counted as artistic excellence. This is the insidious power of aesthetic colonization: it outlives political colonization because it operates at the level of perception, at the level of what you've been trained to see and value.

This is why, when we later speak of Sudanese Islamic aesthetics, we must remember that Islam did not arrive as the

only system of meaning; it arrived into a land already full of visual intelligence. Yet colonial modernity often frames Islamic aesthetics as either a "civilizing" improvement over "paganism," or as an obstacle to "modern art." Both framings are distortions. They treat Sudanese forms as if they require external validation to be legitimate.

In reality, Sudan's aesthetic world has long been a negotiation among multiple cosmologies—river, desert, ancestral practice, scripture, oral memory, craft lineage. The civilizing mission attempted to flatten this complexity into a ladder of evolution. But Sudan's reality is not a ladder. It is a braid. And a braid cannot be understood by pulling one strand and declaring it the whole.

Erasure as curriculum also produces a familiar modern pathology: the compulsion to "prove" civilization through resemblance. The colonized subject, trained into doubt, begins to seek legitimacy by aligning with imported aesthetics, whether academic realism, European modernism, or contemporary global art trends. This alignment can produce extraordinary work, but it also carries a sorrow: the sense that one must borrow the colonizer's mirror to be seen. The mirror does not merely reflect; it judges. It frames certain gestures as sophisticated and others as naive. It frames certain materials as art and others as craft. It frames certain histories as universal and others as local. When you create within such a mirror, you are always at risk of becoming a performer rather than a witness.

Think about the psychological weight of this. Imagine being a young Sudanese artist with genuine talent. You've grown up immersed in visual culture, the patterns on your mother's *Thoub*, the henna designs at weddings, the calligraphy in the mosque, the proportions of traditional architecture. You have an

intuitive understanding of balance, rhythm, color relationships. But when you enter formal art education, none of this knowledge is recognized as expertise. Instead, you're taught as if you're starting from zero. You must learn perspective drawing as if you've never understood spatial relationships. You must learn composition as if you've never arranged visual elements. You must learn color theory as if you've never mixed dyes or chosen fabrics.

The message is clear: what you knew before doesn't count. Your informal education—the knowledge transmitted through observation, practice, apprenticeship—is not legitimate knowledge. Real knowledge comes from institutions, from textbooks, from certified instructors. And to succeed, you must prove your competence in the imported system. You must demonstrate that you can think like a European artist. You must show that you've overcome the limitations of your local context and achieved "universal" (read: Western) standards.

Some artists refuse this logic entirely. They maintain their craft traditions, working outside institutional validation. But they pay a price: exclusion from galleries, from critical attention, from the international circuits that offer financial rewards and prestige. Other artists embrace institutional logic fully, producing work that could have been made anywhere, work that signals their membership in a global artistic elite by deliberately avoiding any "ethnic" markers. They gain recognition but at the cost of disconnection from the soil that formed them.

Yet Sudanese art persists, and it persists with a particular kind of quiet defiance: it keeps smuggling itself through the very systems that tried to erase it. Patterns remain. Rhythms remain. The geometry of the land remains. The oral pulse remains. The craft intelligence remains, even when dismissed.

This persistence is not accidental. It is what happens when a culture refuses to let its memory be reduced to museum labels and school syllabi. The deeper archive survives in bodies, in homes, in rituals, in the hands that continue to weave, dye, sculpt, adorn.

This is why, even under the pressure of "civilizing," Sudan's aesthetic world did not become merely an imitation of Europe. It became something else: a modernity with scars, a modernity that carries continuities in coded form, a modernity that refuses to fully surrender its ancestral disciplines.

Women's practices deserve particular attention here. Throughout the colonial period and beyond, women maintained aesthetic traditions that men's institutional careers often abandoned. While men attended Gordon Memorial College and learned European techniques, women continued embroidering *Thoubs*, applying henna, making pottery, weaving baskets. These practices were systematically devalued, labeled "domestic," "decorative," "craft," never "art." But they were precisely the practices that maintained cultural continuity when institutions failed.

Consider henna application. This is skilled work requiring years of practice to master. The artist must understand pattern composition, symmetry, how designs relate to body structure, how to adapt traditional motifs to individual hands.

She must know the properties of henna paste, the right consistency, how long it needs to set, how to achieve dark, long-lasting stains. She must work with precision and confidence since mistakes cannot be easily corrected. And she must do all this while maintaining social relationships, since henna application is a communal practice involving conversation, song, storytelling.

None of this expertise was recognized by colonial institutions. It wasn't taught at Gordon Memorial College. It didn't appear in museums as "art." It wasn't discussed in the journal Sudan Notes and Records. Yet it was aesthetically sophisticated, culturally significant, and socially essential. It transmitted knowledge across generations. It maintained visual vocabularies. It preserved pattern systems that connected contemporary practice to deep history.

This dismissal of women's aesthetic labor is itself a form of violence. It says that what happens in institutional spaces matters more than what happens in homes. It privileges the authored object over the communally maintained tradition. The aesthetic intelligence preserved by women—precisely because it remained outside institutional validation—often carried more authentic continuities than the work produced by men who had been trained to doubt their inheritance.

This is also where the critic must be ruthless with themselves. Because the reader—especially the educated reader—may carry the civilizing mission inside their own instincts. They may unconsciously seek the "real art" in paintings that resemble Western formats, while treating craft as charming supplement. They may privilege gallery work over domestic forms. They may treat abstraction as sophistication and ritual as superstition. These instincts are not personal failures; they are inherited training. But they must be undone. The purpose of this book is not simply to introduce Sudanese art. It is to unteach the reader the habits that have made Sudanese art easy to misunderstand.

The legacy of erasure as curriculum extends into the present. Even after independence, even after the Khartoum School's efforts to develop a distinctly Sudanese modernism, the colonial hierarchy of forms persists. Art schools still privilege painting

and sculpture over textile and craft.

Museums still separate "fine art" from "ethnographic objects." Critics still treat innovation as more valuable than continuity. Funding still flows more readily to work that resembles international contemporary art than to work rooted in local traditions. And Sudanese artists still navigate the double bind: to be taken seriously internationally often requires producing work legible to global art discourses, which means work influenced by European and American contemporary art. But to maintain connection to Sudanese aesthetic traditions requires working in forms and with concerns that may not register in international contexts. The artist must choose, must compromise, must find ways to be multiple things simultaneously.

This is exhausting. And it is the continuing legacy of colonial aesthetic violence.

So let this chapter stand as a diagnostic: whenever you feel yourself impressed by Sudanese art because it resembles what you already admire, pause. Ask what in you is still colonized. Ask why resemblance feels like legitimacy.

Ask why the local must pass through a foreign standard to be taken seriously. The civilizing mission is not only an event in history. It is a posture that persists whenever we treat Sudan as a learner and the West as the teacher, whenever we treat Sudanese form as derivative rather than sovereign, whenever we treat local aesthetic intelligence as something that must "develop" into recognizability.

Let the record show: the violence of "civilizing" was not only in what it erased, but in what it trained people to want and in a colonized imagination, even desire can become a wound.

6

The Lens of Resistance: When Beauty Became a Code

There are places where truth survives only by learning to whisper. Sudan is one of them. When power turns language into evidence and institutions turn visibility into danger, beauty becomes more than beauty. It becomes a method of safe speech. It becomes a coded architecture, a way of carrying testimony without handing it to the executioner.

This is why, in Sudan, pattern is not merely decoration and abstraction is not merely taste. They are often forms of refuge. They are the aesthetic equivalent of lowering your voice in a room with thin walls: not because you have nothing to say, but because you intend to remain alive long enough to say it again tomorrow.

The modern imagination, especially in art criticism, has a habit of treating "political art" as something that must declare itself loudly: slogans, explicit images, shock, clarity. But Sudan's political reality has often made clarity expensive.

Under censorship, surveillance, shifting regimes, and the ordinary dangers of being too visible, the artwork learns a

different politics: a politics of endurance. It does not always confront power head-on. It sidesteps. It encodes. It carries its meaning in texture and rhythm rather than in overt statement. This is not cowardice. It is intelligence under constraint. A coded artwork is not an artwork that lacks conviction. It is an artwork that understands consequence.

So we begin with a simple proposition: in Sudan, beauty has often functioned as camouflage.

Camouflage, however, is not emptiness. It is deliberate concealment. And concealment implies a threat worth hiding from.

When a community learns that certain subjects cannot be spoken publicly—because speech invites punishment—the aesthetic becomes a second language. One that can be practiced in the home, in the hand, in the textile, in the pattern that repeats without raising suspicion. The code is not always a secret in the dramatic sense. Often it is simply a shared literacy among those who live inside the same pressure. The outside world may see "ornament." The inside world may see a warning, a memory, a lament, a refusal, a prayer.

The historical conditions that necessitated coded aesthetics in Sudan are not abstract. They are documented, brutal, and specific. When Al-Inqaz—the regime that called itself *Salvation*—seized power in 1989, it moved immediately against culture. Not as collateral damage. As strategy. The national theatre was shuttered. Cinemas closed. Love songs vanished from public channels. Magazines were discontinued, books confiscated, and artists were arrested—not for subversion exactly, but for indecency, for morality violations, for the crime of being artistic in an environment that had just decided what virtue looked like.

Within a year, arts institutions were shut down. This was not incidental cultural policy. It was systematic erasure of the infrastructure that allows art to exist publicly. But the assault on artistic expression did not begin in 1989. It was inherited. Each regime took what the previous one had built and extended it—added to the list, sharpened the methods, broadened the definition of what was dangerous.

By the time Bashir consolidated power, the infrastructure of control was comprehensive: pre-publication censorship, confiscated print runs, surveillance of anyone who made or published or distributed, detention without charge, violence without accountability. Print runs were seized before distribution. Newspapers were shut mid-edition.

The threat did not need to be explicit—the knowledge that it existed was enough to reshape every editorial decision, every line drawn, every word chosen.

This created an environment where artists faced arrest or exile, forcing them to adapt their work to navigate the constraints imposed by the state. When the options are silence, exile, imprisonment, or death, aesthetics become survival technology. Artists who chose to remain and work had to develop strategies that allowed expression without triggering retaliation. This is the climate in which coded beauty becomes necessary.

This is why pattern matters. Pattern is an ancient Sudanese discipline, older than modern politics, older than colonial borders. But under rupture, pattern takes on new labor. It begins to carry the weight of what cannot be stated plainly. It becomes a vessel not only for continuity but for resistance. It can do this because pattern is naturally ambiguous to those who do not share its language. A repeated motif can appear harmless to the censor. A rhythm can appear merely aesthetic to the

administrator. A textile can look like "craft" to the institution. Yet within that so-called harmlessness, messages can travel. Pain can be stored. Identity can persist. Memory can refuse erasure.

Think about the intelligence this requires. An artist working under censorship must become a double expert: expert in their aesthetic tradition, and expert in the psychology of the censor. They must know which forms will be read as threatening and which will be dismissed as decorative. They must understand that geometric abstraction might pass where figurative representation would be confiscated. They must know that ancient patterns can carry contemporary meanings without the censor recognizing the substitution. This is sophisticated work. It requires knowing your tradition deeply enough to innovate within it, and knowing power's blind spots well enough to exploit them.

Women's domestic aesthetic practices become especially important here. Because these practices were systematically devalued by both colonial and postcolonial authorities, labeled "craft," "decoration," "women's work," often escaping the scrutiny applied to gallery art and public monuments.

A woman embroidering a *Thoub* in her home was not subject to the same surveillance as a man painting in a studio. The henna applied at a wedding was not reviewed by censors the way a theater performance would be. This created a paradox: the very devaluation that had been used to dismiss women's aesthetic labor also allowed that labor to continue with less interference.

So while male artists who worked in institutional contexts faced direct censorship, women maintained aesthetic traditions that could encode memory, identity, and even resistance without triggering institutional response. The pattern that looked

like "just decoration" to authorities might carry clan histories, religious meanings, or subtle commentaries on contemporary conditions. The henna design that seemed merely pretty might reference displacement, loss, endurance. The authorities didn't bother to decode these forms because they had already decided they weren't significant enough to monitor.

This is not to romanticize women's exclusion from institutional art worlds. It is to recognize a structural irony: what power ignores sometimes survives precisely because it is ignored. The authorities concentrated their censorship efforts on what they recognized as threatening—newspapers, theater, public speeches, gallery exhibitions.

They largely overlooked domestic aesthetics, craft traditions, and communal practices. These "minor" forms therefore became conduits for continuity that more prestigious art forms could not maintain.

Abstraction, too, becomes a shelter.

In Western modernist narratives, abstraction is often described as formal innovation, a turn toward purity of shape and color, a philosophical rejection of representation. Those narratives may be true in some contexts, but they are incomplete here. In Sudan, abstraction has frequently been more than aesthetic exploration. It has been a safehouse. When figuration can become incriminating, when direct depiction can provoke censorship or retaliation, abstraction offers a language that can say everything without naming it. A field of color can carry grief without illustrating a corpse. A fractured geometry can carry the reality of rupture without showing the soldier. A dense pattern can carry the pressure of surveillance without depicting the camera. Abstraction allows testimony to remain unconfiscatable.

Consider what this means practically. Under the Al-Inqaz regime, an artist could not paint a scene depicting political prisoners without risking imprisonment themselves. They could not create work explicitly criticizing government policy. They could not represent military violence against civilians. But they could work in abstraction. They could create compositions that felt heavy, claustrophobic, violent, without ever depicting a specific act of violence.

They could use colors associated with mourning without painting a funeral. They could create fragmented compositions without illustrating destruction. The feeling could be transmitted without the evidence being present.

This is not evasion. It is strategic communication. The work speaks to those who understand its context while remaining illegible to authorities who are looking for explicit political content. It creates a shared language among those who live under the same conditions—a visual vocabulary of pressure, constraint, grief, endurance—that does not require representational specificity to be understood. Those who know, know. Those who don't, see only "abstract art."

The Khartoum School artists understood this intuitively. When Ibrahim El-Salahi combined calligraphic elements with abstraction, when Ahmed Shibrain worked with Arabic letterforms distilled into pure design, they were creating forms that could carry multiple meanings simultaneously. The work could be read as celebrating Islamic heritage (acceptable to authorities), as formal modernist innovation (legible to international audiences), and as subtle assertion of Sudanese identity against both colonial erasure and authoritarian control (understood by local viewers). This multiplicity was not confusion, it was intentional sophistication.

This is not to claim that every abstract Sudanese work is a coded political artifact. That would be another form of violence: the reduction of aesthetic variety into a single narrative of suffering. Sudanese artists are not obligated to be political on demand. Yet the historical conditions make it impossible to pretend that form choices are always purely formal. In a climate of danger, the line between aesthetic preference and survival strategy becomes porous. A critic must therefore read with moral humility.

Not everything is code, but the possibility of code is always present. And that possibility changes how we approach the work. It forces us to respect what is withheld.

Withheldness is one of Sudan's great aesthetic postures. It is the decision not to give the viewer everything, not because the artist is obscure, but because some things cannot be offered safely or cheaply. Withheldness is not a lack. It is a boundary. It is the artwork saying: there are parts of this world you do not get to possess, because possession has historically been the first step toward destruction. The colonial gaze wanted to classify. The authoritarian gaze wants to punish. The foreign humanitarian gaze often wants to consume tragedy as proof of compassion. In the face of all these gazes, Sudanese art learns to protect itself by staying partially closed.

This creates a particular aesthetic quality that outsiders sometimes misread as "mysterious" or "poetic" or "subtle." But these descriptors aestheticize what is actually structural. The work is not trying to be mysterious, it is protecting itself and its community from danger. It is not choosing poetry over directness as a stylistic preference, it is navigating an environment where directness can be fatal.

When Western critics praise Sudanese art for its "subtlety,"

they should ask themselves: subtle compared to what? In what context? For whom?

What appears subtle to someone in a liberal democracy might be screaming to someone who understands the conditions under which it was made.

This is where Post-Interpretive ethics becomes crucial. The traditional critic approaches an artwork like a locked room and feels entitled to pick the lock. They believe the goal is to "reveal meaning." But Sudanese coded aesthetics demand a different ethic: the goal is not to reveal; the goal is to remain morally proximate without violating the work's protective silence.

A code is not an invitation to theft. It is a sign of risk. When you encounter coded beauty, your responsibility is not to decode it for entertainment. Your responsibility is to recognize the conditions that made code necessary and to honor the work's restraint as an act of sovereignty. Because sovereignty is the hidden subject of this chapter.

The colonizer stole sovereignty through borders, and the regime steals sovereignty through surveillance, and the institution steals sovereignty through classification. Sudanese pattern resists by maintaining another kind of sovereignty: the sovereignty of internal language. A community that retains its own visual grammar retains a form of power. It retains the ability to communicate beneath the surface of imposed systems. It retains the ability to carry memory forward without asking permission. It retains the ability to remain itself even when forced to appear otherwise. This is why "craft" becomes so central to resistance: because institutions often ignore it, and what is ignored can sometimes survive more freely.

There is an irony here that should not be missed. The very hierarchies that demeaned Sudanese craft traditions as "minor"

sometimes helped them survive as sites of encoded continuity. What the institution dismisses, it surveils less. What it surveils less, it controls less. And so the domestic, the woven, the dyed, the adorned, the supposedly "small" arts, often become the quiet arteries through which cultural memory continues to circulate. This is not romantic. It is structural. Power pays attention to what it fears. It often overlooks what it has already decided is beneath it.

When the *Al-Inqaz* regime shut down theaters and galleries, they were targeting the institutional sites of culture they recognized as significant. They were less concerned with what women were weaving in their homes, what patterns were being embroidered on *Thoubs*, what designs were being traced in henna. These forms continued because they were underestimated. And because they continued, they carried forward aesthetic knowledge, pattern systems, color relationships, compositional principles that institutional art could not maintain under censorship. Yet even coded beauty has its cost. To live in code is to live with constraint. It means carrying pain without release.

It means translating your own truth into forms that will not get you punished. It means becoming fluent in concealment. And concealment can shape the psyche. It trains caution. It trains doubleness. It trains the habit of speaking sideways.

Over time, this can become not only strategy but identity: a culture becomes known for its "subtlety," its "poetry," its "metaphor," not because it chose softness, but because hardness was dangerous. The outsider may admire this subtlety aesthetically, while forgetting the violence that demanded it. This is why admiration can become another form of forgetting. To praise coded beauty without naming the conditions that produced code

is to aestheticize survival and call it style. So let us be clear: in Sudan, metaphor is not always literary luxury. It is often a safety mechanism.

A symbol that appears as a bird might be a way of speaking about flight, disappearance, exile—themes that could not be addressed directly without implying criticism of government policies that created displacement. A repeated line might be a way of speaking about borders that cannot be crossed, divisions imposed by violence. A dense field might be a way of speaking about collective pressure, about living under surveillance, about the weight of authority bearing down on every aspect of life. Again: not always. But often enough that the ethical reader must remain awake. The ethical reader must treat ambiguity not as a puzzle but as a sign of risk.

Consider the practical realities. An artist living under the Bashir regime knew that their studio could be raided. They knew that exhibition spaces could be shut down. They knew that work deemed offensive could result in arrest. They knew that associations with certain political groups or ideologies could make them targets.

Under such conditions, every formal choice carries weight. The decision to work abstractly rather than figuratively is not merely aesthetic, it is strategic. The decision to use certain colors, certain compositions, certain materials is informed by an understanding of what will be tolerated and what will provoke response.

This creates a peculiar double consciousness in the artist. They must think simultaneously as creator and as potential accused. They must imagine how their work will be read not only by sympathetic viewers but by hostile authorities. They must consider: Can this be interpreted as criticism of the government?

Does this reference events that are forbidden to mention? Could this imagery be used as evidence against me? This constant vigilance shapes the work in ways that are often invisible to outsiders who have never had to make art under such conditions.

The psychic cost of this is rarely discussed. We talk about coded beauty, about clever resistance, about aesthetic strategies. But we less often acknowledge the exhaustion of never being able to speak plainly. The frustration of having something urgent to say and having to wrap it in layers of protection. The fear that accompanies every exhibition, every publication, every public appearance of your work. The knowledge that one wrong move could mean imprisonment, torture, exile, death.

This is not abstract danger. This is the daily reality for artists working under authoritarianism.

And yet, they continued to work. This itself is remarkable. It would have been simpler to abandon art entirely, to focus on mere survival, to stop trying to make meaning in a world that punishes meaning-making. But they didn't. They found ways. They developed strategies. They built networks of trust where work could be shared safely. They created forms that could carry truth without declaring it. They maintained aesthetic traditions even when those traditions had to be practiced quietly, privately, carefully.

This lens also prepares us for what comes next: the lens of silence, the lens of exile, the lens of war. Because code is not only aesthetic; it is historical. It becomes more intense as repression increases. It becomes more necessary as violence becomes normalized. In times of revolutionary upheaval, the code sometimes breaks, suddenly language becomes direct, posters become explicit, murals name what was once withheld. But even then, the old intelligence remains: the understanding

that visibility is double-edged, that public truth can be both liberation and target.

The 2018-2019 Sudanese Revolution provides a perfect example of this dynamic. Suddenly, after decades of coded expression, art became explicit. Murals appeared on public walls depicting revolutionary themes. Street art named the oppressors. Music lyrics directly criticized the regime. This explosion of direct expression was liberating, finally, after thirty years of censorship, artists could speak plainly.

But even in this moment of openness, the habits of caution remained. Artists still worked anonymously or pseudonymously. They still made work that resists singular interpretation. Because they knew that revolutions are fragile, that power can reassert itself, that today's freedom might become tomorrow's evidence. And they were right to be cautious. The revolution did not end authoritarianism. It created a transitional moment that has since collapsed into civil war.

The habit of coded expression, developed over decades of repression, remains relevant. The intelligence of the sideways sentence, the protective ambiguity, the strategic withholding, these are not outdated skills. They are ongoing necessities. In other words, Sudanese art does not simply "express." It navigates. It navigates danger. It navigates audiences. It navigates the demand to represent a nation to outsiders while also remaining faithful to lived complexity. It navigates the institution's hunger for legible narratives and the community's need for protective ambiguity. It navigates the temptation to perform suffering and the dignity of refusing performance. In such navigation, pattern becomes compass. Repetition becomes anchor. Abstraction becomes shelter. Beauty becomes code.

And now, a final instruction for the reader, sharp, because it

must be.

Do not treat this chapter as a license to hunt for hidden messages in every Sudanese work. That is the tourist gaze wearing scholarly clothing. The goal is not to turn Sudanese art into a scavenger hunt for political secrets. The goal is to develop an ethic: to recognize when beauty may be doing protective labor, and to respond with restraint rather than extraction. If the work withholds, let it. If the work speaks indirectly, don't punish it by forcing clarity onto it. Learn to respect the intelligence of the sideways sentence. In Sudan, the sideways sentence often saved lives. Some work wants to be decoded. Some work invites interpretation. But some work needs to remain partially opaque, not because the artist failed to communicate, but because opacity itself is the communication. It says: This is mine. This is ours. You do not get all of it.

And in a context where everything has been taken—sovereignty, resources, safety, futures—the right to withhold becomes precious. It is one of the few forms of control that cannot be fully confiscated.

This is why the Post-Interpretive approach matters so deeply for Sudanese art. Traditional art criticism, trained in Western liberal contexts where free speech is largely protected, approaches artworks with the assumption that meaning should be accessible, that the critic's job is to illuminate, that transparency is a virtue. But in contexts where transparency can be fatal, where meaning must be protected not revealed, where the artwork's survival depends on its strategic ambiguity, this critical approach becomes violating.

The ethical critic must learn to read differently. They must develop sensitivity to what is withheld. They must recognize protective strategies without dismantling them.

They must honor the work's right to partial illegibility. They must understand that some meanings are not for them, that the work may be speaking to specific communities in specific ways, and that as an outsider, their role is not to master the work but to respect its boundaries.

This does not mean abandoning interpretation entirely. It means approaching interpretation with humility. It means asking: What am I entitled to know? What might this work be protecting? What are the risks of making its meanings too explicit? How can I write about this work in ways that don't endanger the artist or the communities they're part of?

These are not questions that traditional art criticism teaches us to ask. But they are essential when engaging with art made under conditions of danger.

Let the record show: when power made direct speech dangerous, Sudanese art did not fall silent. It learned to speak in pattern, quietly, repeatedly, and with a discipline that turned beauty itself into a form of resistance. And that resistance was not always visible to outsiders, was not always legible to institutions, was not always recognized as the profound act of courage it was.

But it was there. It is there. It continues.

7

The Lens of the Sacred: The Theology of Repetition

A certain kind of modern mind hears repetition and thinks of boredom.

Sudanese aesthetic intelligence hears repetition and thinks of mercy. Because repetition is what you reach for when the world won't stop shaking. It is what you build when the ground is unreliable, when regimes change, when borders harden, when exile multiplies, when scarcity becomes a daily pedagogy.

In such conditions, novelty is not always liberation; it can be another form of instability. Repetition, by contrast, is a promise. It says: something returns. Something holds. Something can be trusted to appear again tomorrow. The theology of repetition is therefore not a decorative theme in Sudanese Islamic aesthetics; it is one of its deepest survival structures.

When you stand near Sudanese patterns—woven, painted, inscribed, tattooed, carved—you can feel this: repetition is not merely visual. It is behavioral. It belongs to the body. It belongs to time. It belongs to devotion. The pattern isn't an image you look at; it is a rhythm you enter.

This is why the phrase "God is a pattern that breathes" does not merely sound poetic. It describes a lived metaphysics: that the divine is encountered not through spectacle but through recurrence, through the return of prayer, the return of Names, the return of verses, the return of the sun, the return of water, the return of the communal circle.

The West often treats Islamic aesthetics as a set of visual rules: aniconism here, geometry there, calligraphy here, ornament there. But rules are the shallow layer. The deeper layer is attentional.

Islamic form, in many Sudanese contexts, is an architecture for remembrance. And remembrance is not an intellectual act, it is a training regimen. You do not remember God once. You return. You return until the return itself becomes a kind of shelter. In that sense, repetition is not redundancy; it is discipline. It is the cultivation of steadiness in a world that tries to turn you into a reaction.

Consider the practice of *dhikr* in Sudan. Not as a religious "practice" described from outside, but as an aesthetic engine. *Dhikr* is remembrance made physical. It is the Name spoken until the speaking becomes the self's new architecture.

Each Sufi order carries its own form—its particular posture, its specific breath, its rhythm of return. The point is not novelty. The point is *fana*: the dissolution of the self's noise so that something steadier can be heard.

Dhikr is repetition that softens the ego's sharp edges. It is a rhythm that erodes panic. It is sound that reorganizes the interior.

In its simplest form, *dhikr* is this: the Name, repeated, until repetition becomes residence. Not information acquired but presence restored.

In Sudan, where Sufi orders have long shaped communal spiritual life, *dhikr* also becomes a public aesthetic: circles, movements, chants, synchronized breath, the body learning devotion as rhythm. At the tomb of Sheikh Hamed al-Nil in Omdurman—a revered leader of the Qadiriyya in Sudan, though the order itself was founded by Abdul Qadir Gilani in twelfth-century Baghdad—the Qadiriyya order gathers each Friday before sunset. The circle forms. The Names begin. Bodies move in synchronized rhythm—the community restoring its connection to the one center that does not shift.

When a culture is steeped in this kind of repetition, the eye becomes trained by it. Visual repetition begins to feel natural because the soul is already practiced in return. Pattern becomes a visual analog of *dhikr*: the eye recites in silence what the mouth recites aloud. Sudan's Sufi orders understood recitation not as performance but as formation: verses returned to until they became reflex, chants sustained through darkness until the boundary between remembering and being dissolved—giving Sudanese Qur'anic recitation a melodic depth that was neither decorative nor supplementary but structural to how the tradition reproduced itself across generations.

The shaykh's task is not to demonstrate but to guide. Not to perform remembrance but to cultivate it—to help the seeker move from deliberate return to continuous presence. Not the ceremony but the life. Not the Friday circle but the Tuesday kitchen, the Monday worry, the three-in-the-morning silence. *Dhikr* is not something you do. It is something you become.

This is why Sudanese Islamic patterning so often refuses the single focal point. It does not always give you a "main image" to conquer with interpretation. It gives you a field. It gives you a continuity. It gives you a sense that meaning

is not located in one dramatic symbol but distributed across recurrence. The viewer trained by modern museums often feels lost here, because the museum taught them to hunt for the "subject." But this aesthetic is not about subject. It is about sustained attention. It is not asking you to identify; it is asking you to stay. Staying is an underrated spiritual act. In a world addicted to stimulus, staying becomes a form of worship.

The deepest form of *dhikr* is not the ceremony. It is the life lived inside remembrance—where the Name is not recited on schedule but breathed in the gaps between every other thought. Where awareness of the Divine is not a spiritual achievement but a permanent orientation. Where even grief becomes a form of address.

This is what the tradition names as maturity: not piety as performance, but presence as condition.

Repetition also teaches humility. The ego loves novelty because novelty flatters the ego's belief that it is the center of experience. But repetition reminds you that you are not the center. The day will return whether or not you feel special. Prayer will return whether or not you feel inspired. The Nile will flow whether or not you are ready.

The desert will remain severe whether or not you have opinions. Repetition is therefore a kind of metaphysical correction. It reduces the self's obsession with being unique by reminding it that the true center is not the self.

The true center is the One who does not need your performance to remain real.

This understanding is embedded in the very structure of Islamic geometry. What Islamic geometric patterning encodes is not symbol but argument: that the One is present in every unit of the many, that unity does not require sameness, that

coherence is possible without coercion. This is *Tawhid*—not an abstraction but a visual fact. The pattern demonstrates what theology asserts.

This is why the repetition in Islamic geometry is not merely mathematical pleasure. It is ethical geometry. It trains the mind away from chaos. It offers a visual experience of order without domination: order as coherence rather than control. The pattern does not end. It could always continue. That is the point: infinity not as concept but as form, as something the eye can follow without reaching a wall. And because Sudan's environment already taught coherence as survival—through water discipline, through heat discipline, through scarcity—the visual theology of repetition resonates with the land's pedagogy. The desert taught restraint. The river taught rhythm. Scripture taught return. The resulting aesthetic is a convergence: a world where pattern is the meeting point of climate and worship.

Geometry, in this tradition, is not abstraction. It is attention made rigorous—a practice of looking at the world's structure until the structure becomes transparent to what underlies it. The circle is not chosen arbitrarily. It has no beginning and no end. It encloses without privileging any point on its circumference. It is unity in the form the eye can trace.

Now consider the Qur'an itself, not only as content but as form. The Qur'an is revelation, yes, but it is also recitation, and recitation is repetition. Verses are returned to daily.

Surahs become companions. Names become anchors. The Qur'an is explicit about this — 'remember your Lord when you forget' (Al-Kahf, 18:24).

Remember with much remembrance. The text does not ask for understanding alone. It asks for return.

In that sense, the Qur'an is not consumed once like a book;

it is inhabited. When a text is inhabited rather than consumed, it changes the aesthetics of the culture around it. It produces an intimacy with repetition that cannot be understood by the modern reader who treats reading as information acquisition.

Qur'anic reading is not primarily informational. It is transformational. And transformation, in spiritual life, requires recurrence. One does not become steady through one insight. One becomes steady through a thousand returns. This helps explain why calligraphy in Sudan is often less about display and more about placement. A verse at a threshold is not "art on a wall." It is a protective act. A Name written and carried is not "design." It is a portable remembrance. A script on paper is not a collectible. It is a working object: a tool for attention and reassurance. The beauty of the script is inseparable from its function.

The letter is beautiful because it holds something sacred. Its elegance is not vanity. It is *adab,* proper comportment in the presence of what is greater than you.

In the older craft traditions, the artisan did not begin with tools. He began with preparation—ablution, prayer, the visit to a saint's tomb, the recitation that oriented the self before the hand moved. The making was inseparable from the remembering. The work was not produced in secular time; it was performed in consecrated time. This is *adab* made material: the discipline of approaching the work as one approaches the sacred.

Here, the idea of "breath" becomes essential. A pattern that does not breathe becomes dead decoration. But a pattern that is lived—repeated through the hands, through the home, through communal ritual—breathes because it is renewed. Sudanese repetition breathes because it is not performed once for a museum; it is repeated as life.

The same motif appears in a textile because the textile is made again. The same geometry appears in architecture because the house needs to be built again. The same verses appear in calligraphy because the believer returns again.

Repetition, here, is not copying. It is continuity. It is the refusal to let the world's instability become the soul's instability.

The making of Islamic geometric patterns is not simply skilled labor. It is a form of sustained attention that alters the one who practices it. The repetition that produces the pattern also produces a practitioner—someone trained in the discipline of return, of exactness, of concentration that outlasts distraction. The pattern teaches the maker what the maker encodes in the pattern: steadiness.

This is also why repetition is an antidote to the colonizer's hunger for novelty. Colonial modernity often trained colonized societies to measure progress through "innovation" that resembles Europe. It taught that the new is superior, and the inherited is backward.

But repetition refuses that hierarchy. Repetition insists that inheritance is not failure. It is fidelity. It says: what has proven itself worthy of return is not outdated; it is tested. In a culture shaped by rupture, to return to what endures is not regression. It is survival. And yet repetition is not merely conservative. It is creative within constraint. Anyone who has watched a master weaver knows this.

Repetition is never identical. It contains subtle shifts. It contains the imprint of the hand, the mood, the moment, the available materials. In that sense, repetition is an art of variation without rupture. It allows difference without collapse.

That is a profound aesthetic philosophy: the idea that you can change while remaining continuous, that you can adapt

without severing your lineage. Sudanese art embodies this constantly, particularly in craft lineages where motifs travel across generations, altered slightly by each hand but recognizable as belonging. The pattern breathes because each repetition is alive.

The tradition is not static. Simple forms give way to more intricate ones—simple stars becoming complex polygons, single units generating tessellations that could tile a wall, a floor, a dome, a world. What changes is not the commitment to repetition but the sophistication within it. The constraint is the engine, not the limit. You cannot see this if you approach the work looking for novelty. You can only see it if you stay long enough to watch variation emerge from fidelity.

This brings us to the ethical implication for the reader. If you approach Sudanese repetition with a modernist appetite for novelty, you will miss its intelligence. You will call it "decorative" because you cannot see that it is doing spiritual labor. You will call it "traditional" as a polite dismissal. You will treat it as background. But repetition is not background in Sudan. Repetition is how a people holds itself together. It is how devotion becomes embodied. It is how memory refuses erasure. It is how the self learns that it is not sovereign.

When the circle appears in this tradition, it is not chosen for beauty. It is chosen for argument. It argues that unity is possible. That something can be whole without a single point of dominance. When the star appears, it is not decoration. It is evidence—that complexity can emerge from coherence, that the many and the one are not enemies.

The pattern is theology made visible, made touchable, made livable.

So when you encounter Sudanese Islamic aesthetics, geometries, scripts, rhythms, do not ask first, What does this

represent? Ask instead, What does this return accomplish? What does it stabilize? What does it protect? What does it hold? What does it train the eye to prefer? What does it teach the body to trust? Because in Sudan, the theology of repetition is not an abstraction. It is a lived method for remaining human under pressure. It is the refusal to let chaos become your interior language.

It is the practice of return as dignity. It is the discovery that the One reveals itself most honestly not in a single dramatic symbol but in the infinite patience of return—that unity does not require uniformity, that the divine is more legible in repetition than in spectacle. It is the proof that a tradition of constraint and pattern, properly inhabited, does not limit the spirit but expands it: the art that insists beauty is not vanity, but the shape devotion takes when it refuses to be invisible.

Let the record show: in Sudanese Islamic aesthetics, repetition is not redundancy, it is mercy made visible, a pattern that breathes so the people can breathe with it. It is the aesthetic embodiment of a theological truth: that God's mercy returns, that the faithful return to God, that the pattern holds when everything else fractures, and that in a world of relentless rupture, the ability to return, to prayer, to community, to the Name, to the pattern, is not stagnation but salvation.

8

The Lens of Sand & Scripture: Aesthetic Islam in Sudan

Sudan did not "become Islamic" the way a textbook becomes a chapter. It absorbed Islam the way earth absorbs rain: unevenly, tenderly, with regions of deep saturation and regions of stubborn dryness, until the result was not simply religion but climate, a way of moving through the world where devotion becomes pattern, where the unseen becomes neighborly, and where beauty is not a performance but an ethic.

The great mistake, when speaking of Sudanese Islamic aesthetics, is to approach them as derivatives: either "Arab," or "African," or a mere provincial echo of grander centers. Sudan is not an echo. Sudan is a third thing, an aesthetic thirdness forged at the seam between desert minimalism and river memory, between oral inheritance and written revelation, between ancestral protective technologies and Qur'anic discipline. It is not a compromise. It is an invention. And it is an invention born not from leisure, but from survival.

Islam spread to Sudan from the north, after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. But this was not a sudden transformation.

Nubia had already been Christianized, largely through Egyptian Coptic influence, though the Nubian kingdoms varied in their Christian affiliations.

The Nubian Christian kingdoms—*Nobatia*, *Makuria*, *Alodia*—each had their own arc, their own century of negotiation, their own slow yielding to Islamic influence. This long timespan—over eight centuries from first contact to final conversion—reveals something crucial: Islam in Sudan was not imposed overnight. It was negotiated, absorbed, translated into local idioms over generations.

The *Funj*, who established their sultanate in 1504, were originally non-Muslims, but the aristocracy soon adopted Islam. Yet even as they became nominal Muslims, they retained many traditional African customs. This pattern, official conversion accompanied by persistence of local practices, characterizes much of Sudanese Islamization. The conversion was largely the work of a handful of Islamic missionaries who came to Sudan from the larger Muslim world, but their great success was not in replacing what existed; it was in finding ways to speak through it.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, numerous schools of religious learning were founded along the White Nile, and the *Shāyqiyyah* confederacy was converted. Many of the more famous Sudanese missionaries were not orthodox jurists but Sufi holy men, members of influential religious brotherhoods who sought the way to God through mystical contemplation. This is crucial.

What made Sufism take root here was not doctrine alone. When Sheikh Taj Eldin El-Bahari arrived in the 16th century, carrying the *Qadiriyya* tradition from Baghdad, he did not confront the land's existing spiritualities—he spoke through them. The Sufi way of attracting followers was not compulsion.

It was demonstration: patience, simplicity, a form of presence that the people recognized as coherent.

This method of Islamization matters aesthetically. Sufi orders did not arrive demanding the immediate erasure of local practices. They arrived with patience, with flexibility, with an understanding that conversion is a process, not an event. They allowed singing where orthodox jurists might forbid it. They accommodated drumming where legalists might condemn it. They found ways to channel existing devotional energies into Islamic forms rather than simply prohibiting them. This created a distinctly Sudanese Islam, one that drew on Sufi orders like the Khatmiyya, as well as the Mahdist Ansar movement—which, though distinct from the Sufi brotherhoods and in many ways critical of them, equally shaped Sudanese Islamic identity—to spread Islam and shape Sudanese Islamic culture through rituals, festivals, and spiritual practices that deeply influenced Sudanese identity.

Islamic aesthetics in Sudan are often misunderstood because outsiders confuse ornament with decoration. They see calligraphy and treat it as style. They see geometry and treat it as pattern-play. They see talismanic papers and dismiss them as superstition. They see Sufi spaces and reduce them to "folk Islam," as though devotion that breathes in local lungs is less legitimate than devotion spoken in institutional accents. This book refuses those reductions.

In Sudan, Islamic aesthetics are not simply the adornment of belief. They are one of belief's most practical instruments: tools for remembrance, protection, coherence, and mercy in a world that has rarely offered stability.

Start with the obvious, because the obvious is often where misunderstanding begins: the Qur'an arrives as a text, but its

presence is not only textual. It is sonic. It is spatial. It is rhythmic. It reorganizes time through prayer, reorganizes speech through recitation, reorganizes the home through thresholds of purity, reorganizes the body through posture. And when a religion reorganizes the body, it inevitably reorganizes the visual. The movements of prayer teach a certain geometry of humility. The repetition of dhikr teaches a certain rhythm of return. The discipline of daily devotion trains the eye to prefer order over chaos, not order as authoritarian control, but order as refuge: the quiet reassurance that something in the universe remains aligned even when politics fractures.

This is why Sudan's Islamic visuality is rarely obsessed with spectacle. It does not need to scream. It does not need to prove itself. It tends toward what I would call reverent containment: a beauty that holds itself back, because held-backness is one of devotion's oldest manners. When you stand near certain Sudanese Islamic forms, calligraphic panels, talismanic pages, geometric arrangements, textile repetitions, you can feel this containment. The beauty is not trying to seduce you. It is trying to keep you intact. It behaves like a shelter, not a stage.

And yet Sudan's Islam is not a sterile minimalism. It is not an imported austerity. It is not a monochrome theology. It is full of local breath. Sudan has always had an intimate relationship with pattern before Islam, with protective marks before Islam, with the unseen before Islam. So when Qur'anic language enters the aesthetic climate, it does not erase that earlier intelligence; it inherits it, refines it, and—at times—reorients it.

The result is not a replacement but a layering. Sudan's Islamic aesthetics often feel like scripture learning to speak through sand: the clarity of revelation carried by the humility of landscape.

This is where Sufism becomes central, not as exotic mysticism, but as a social and aesthetic infrastructure. The Sufi brotherhoods played a vital role in linking Sudan to the larger world of Islam beyond the Nile valley. But they also played a crucial role in making Islam locally intelligible, locally livable. In Sudan, Sufi orders and their associated spaces have long functioned as communal engines: places of teaching, remembrance, healing, gathering, and moral formation.

Sufi visual culture is often deeply practical. It understands that spiritual life is not maintained by abstract belief alone; it is maintained by repeated gestures, shared rituals, embodied sound, and objects that anchor attention. A calligraphic inscription is not simply "beautiful writing." It is an attentional device. It holds the mind to the Name. It brings the unseen into the room without theatrics. It turns a wall into a reminder. It turns the home into a small sanctuary.

The *qubba*, the domed tomb structures that mark the graves of Sufi saints throughout Sudan, exemplifies this practical aesthetic theology. These structures are not merely memorials. They are active sites. People visit them seeking *baraka* (blessing), seeking intercession, seeking healing, seeking comfort. The architecture itself communicates: the dome suggests heaven, the circular form suggests perfection, the elevation suggests aspiration. But the forms remain humble enough to be approachable.

They do not intimidate. They invite.

Inside these spaces, aesthetic choices serve devotional function. The whitewashed walls create calm. The geometric patterns in woodwork or textiles create rhythm. The calligraphic panels create focus. Everything works together to produce an environment conducive to remembrance. This is aesthetic

intelligence: the understanding that physical space shapes consciousness, that beauty can assist the soul toward its purposes. Calligraphy, then, is not an "art form" first. It is a posture.

The Western gaze often fetishizes Arabic calligraphy as an aesthetic object detached from its devotional function. It frames it as elegant design, collectible décor, cultural motif. But Sudanese calligraphy—especially in its Sufi and talismanic contexts—often operates closer to medicine than to decoration. It is used to stabilize. It is used to heal. It is used to protect. It is used to align. The letter becomes a vessel. The verse becomes a shield.

The Name becomes a kind of architectural beam holding the interior life upright. When you understand this, you stop describing the work with the thin language of "visual appeal." You begin describing it with the thicker language of care.

The f*aqīhs,* Islamic jurists and teachers who were often also Sufi practitioners, understood this intuitively. They did not separate religious knowledge from aesthetic practice. When they taught students to write Qur'anic verses, they were teaching theology, yes, but also teaching rhythm, proportion, spatial awareness, patience.

The physical act of forming letters with care was itself a devotional practice. The student learned that beauty requires discipline, that sacred language requires sacred handling, that the hand can be an instrument of worship.

And now we must speak of talismanic papers, because they are frequently mishandled by both secular critics and pious modernists. The secular critic dismisses them as superstition and reduces them to anthropological curiosity. The pious modernist sometimes dismisses them as illegitimate folk practice. Both stances can be forms of violence when they refuse to see why

such objects exist.

These objects do not announce themselves as art. A verse, folded into leather, worn at the chest. A prayer, sealed in a pouch, hung above a doorway. A name written small and tucked near the heart, carried into spaces where danger is possible. What they hold—Qur'anic verses, divine names, prayers for protection against illness, against the evil eye, against misfortune of various kinds—is the same protection that orthodox theology also claims to offer. Orthodox Islam sometimes objects: protection comes from God alone, not from objects.

The tension is real and ongoing. And yet—when the world is large and hostile and the body needs somewhere to locate its hope, the tangible is not nothing. The object does not replace trust; it materializes it. It gives the fear somewhere to land. Even if one rejects certain practices doctrinally, the ethical task remains: don't mock the human longing underneath them. Don't treat people's survival strategies as embarrassing. The modern world has its own talismans, insurance policies, security cameras, biometric locks, antidepressants, brand rituals, algorithmic reassurance.

We call ours "rational" because we like ourselves. Sudan's objects simply wear their hope more openly.

The aesthetic intelligence of talismanic objects should not be dismissed. The calligraphy on these papers is often exquisite, miniature, precise, carefully proportioned. The folding and enclosing in leather requires skill. The wearing or placement requires understanding of where protection is needed most: over the heart, at thresholds, near children. This is material culture that encodes care. Whether or not the objects "work" in a metaphysical sense, they work psychologically and socially.

They say: you are not alone in your vulnerability. This vulnerability has been named, addressed, ritually managed. You have done what you can.

Now consider geometry, nomadic geometry, desert geometry, the quiet mathematics of patterning that appears in textiles, architecture, and ornament. Geometry in Sudan is not merely imported Islamic design; it is a meeting between Qur'anic discipline and environmental pedagogy. The desert already taught restraint.

Scarcity already taught minimalism. The Nile already taught rhythm. So Islamic geometry does not land in Sudan as foreign abstraction. It resonates with what the land already trained the eye to honor: repetition without waste, order without spectacle, structure that can hold a community's breath.

The geometric patterns in Sudanese textiles, architectural decoration, and craft work often combine what might be called "Islamic" motifs—star patterns, interlacing designs, arabesque forms—with patterns that seem to reference older, pre-Islamic traditions. A woven basket might incorporate both. A textile might layer both. Rather than seeing this as syncretism or confusion, it should be recognized as sophistication: the ability to hold multiple aesthetic lineages simultaneously, to honor both scripture and soil.

This is why I call Sudan's Islamic aesthetics a "visual theology," but not the kind that argues. The kind that organizes. Theology, here, is not merely doctrinal statement. It is spatial behavior. It is the organization of attention. It is the refusal of chaos as an internal condition. It is the crafting of environments—homes, *zawiyas*, mosques, objects—where remembrance can happen naturally. In this sense, beauty becomes ethical because it assists the soul. It makes certain

virtues easier: patience, modesty, recollection, gratitude.

Aesthetic life becomes spiritual ergonomics.

Think about what this means practically. In a Sudanese home where Islamic aesthetics are taken seriously, every visual element potentially serves devotional function. The calligraphic panel on the wall is not décor, it is a daily reminder of God's presence.

The geometric pattern on the prayer rug is not decoration, it creates a visual field that helps focus attention during prayer. The arrangement of objects creates order, which creates calm, which creates space for remembrance. This is environmental design in service of spiritual life.

And here a crucial line must be drawn: Sudanese Islamic aesthetics are not "ornamental." Ornamental is what the bored call what they do not need.

In Sudan, Islamic form has often been needed. Needed because it turned homes into reminders when formal institutions were unreliable. Needed because it offered communal rhythm when politics produced fracture. Needed because it offered a vocabulary of dignity when colonial hierarchies trained shame. Needed because it offered a language of return when exile and displacement began to multiply. Needed because it offered an ethics of restraint in environments where excess was punished by heat, scarcity, or surveillance. Needed, too, because Sudanese religious life, especially in Sufi-inflected contexts, often emphasized not only law but love, not only rule but remembrance, not only correctness but presence. Presence requires anchors. Beauty becomes one of those anchors.

The practice of *dhikr e*xemplifies this perfectly. *Dhikr* is simultaneously sonic, bodily, and communal. Groups gather, often at Sufi centers, on Friday evenings. They form circles. They chant

divine names or verses in rhythmic patterns. Sometimes they move, swaying, stepping, creating choreographed patterns of collective motion.

The repetition creates altered states, not through drugs or dramatic ritual, but through the simple persistence of focused attention and communal rhythm.

The aesthetic dimension of *dhikr* cannot be separated from its spiritual function. The rhythm is carefully calibrated. The sonic qualities of different names or phrases are understood to produce different effects. The spatial arrangement—the circle—creates equality and unity. The movements synchronize individual bodies into collective expression. This is not "performance" in the theatrical sense.

This is communal technology for producing and maintaining spiritual states.

When *dhikr* happens in a *zawiya* (Sufi center), the architecture supports the practice. The space is typically modest but carefully proportioned. The acoustics allow voices to resonate without becoming cacophonous. The lighting, often natural light filtered through small windows or openings, creates an atmosphere of contained luminosity. Everything serves the purpose: to create an environment where remembrance can happen easily, naturally, collectively.

Now we approach *Zār,* carefully, without the cheap thrill of exoticism. *Zār* rituals and their associated aesthetic elements have been described and debated in various ways, and the outsider's gaze has often turned them into spectacle. But within the Sudanese aesthetic archive, what matters is not whether a foreign observer finds *Zār* "strange." What matters is what it reveals: that the body and the unseen have long been treated as intertwined realities, and that healing may require ritual form,

communal rhythm, and symbolic action.

Zār practices, which involve spirit possession, healing rituals, specific music, specific colors, specific objects, exist in complicated relationship with orthodox Islam. Some Muslims condemn them as *shirk* (polytheism). Others practice them while maintaining Islamic identity. The tension itself is revealing: it shows that Sudanese religious life is not monolithic, that people navigate between official doctrine and lived need, that healing sometimes requires resources beyond what orthodox practice provides.

The aesthetics of *Zār,* its sonic textures, its colors, its objects, its patterned gestures, belong to a broader Sudanese truth: that art is sometimes the earliest form of therapy, and that communal ritual is sometimes the most practical medicine available when institutions fail. When a person is suffering, from mental illness, from trauma, from mysterious affliction, and formal medical care is unavailable or ineffective, *Zār* offers an alternative framework. It names the suffering as spirit possession.

It provides a ritual process for addressing it. It mobilizes community support. It uses music, movement, color, and symbolic action to create transformation. Whether one believes in the metaphysics of spirit possession is less important than recognizing what the practice accomplishes socially and psychologically. It gives suffering a name and a narrative. It provides agency, the afflicted person is not merely passive victim but active participant in their own healing.

It creates community, others witness, support, participate. It uses aesthetic means—rhythm, color, movement—to produce altered states that may allow psychological breakthrough. This is sophisticated healing technology, even if it doesn't conform

to biomedical models.

This is where the phrase, God is a pattern that breathes, becomes more than poetry. It becomes a key. In Sudan, pattern is not merely visual. It is ontological. It suggests that reality itself is structured, that recurrence is not boredom but mercy, that order is not oppression but coherence. When the world is violent, the idea that something repeats reliably—prayer times, verses, Names, geometric cycles—becomes a lifeline.

The pattern breathes because it is lived. It is not a static design. It is enacted daily. A woven pattern repeats. A dhikr repeats. A verse repeats. A day repeats. Survival repeats. Beauty repeats. And through repetition, the self remains held.

Consider the daily rhythm of Islamic practice. Five prayers punctuate the day at specific times. Each prayer involves specific movements, specific recitations, specific orientations (toward Mecca).

This creates a temporal pattern, a daily geometry of devotion. For someone living this pattern, time itself becomes structured differently. The day is not an undifferentiated flow but a series of marked moments. Each prayer is an opportunity to return, to recalibrate, to remember purpose.

This repeated return creates psychological stability. When life is chaotic, when politics are violent, when the future is uncertain, this reliable pattern offers refuge. You may not control what happens to you, but you control this: you can pray. You can perform ablution. You can orient yourself toward Mecca. You can recite the verses. You can bow, prostrate, rise. This pattern holds even when everything else fractures. The aesthetic dimension of this pattern should not be underestimated. The movements of prayer have visual elegance, the bow, the prostration, the return to standing create a kind of choreography. When many people

pray together, their synchronized movements create powerful visual patterns.

The sonic dimension, the recitation of Qur'anic verses, the call to prayer, adds auditory beauty. The spatial dimension, the orientation toward Mecca, the arrangement of bodies in rows, creates geometric order. All of this serves devotional purpose, but it also creates beauty. And that beauty is not incidental. It is part of how the practice sustains itself. Beautiful forms are easier to return to.

This chapter must also name Sudan's position in the false binary of "Arab" and "African." Sudanese Islamic aesthetics are often misread because observers want to assign Sudan a single belonging. But Sudan has long been an aesthetic seam: North and sub-Saharan currents, Nile corridors and desert routes, Arabic and local languages, imported scripts and indigenous marks, Qur'anic recitation and oral praise traditions. The Sudanese visual world does not fit the tidy identity politics of outsiders. It is braided. It is layered. It is not "confused." It is complex. And complexity, in postcolonial contexts, is often treated as a problem rather than as a truth. This book will treat it as truth.

The question "Is Sudan Arab or African?" is a colonial question. It assumes these categories are stable, mutually exclusive, and meaningful. But Sudanese people have never needed to choose. They have been both, neither, and something else, simultaneously, fluidly, contextually. Sudanese Arabic is not Egyptian Arabic or Gulf Arabic, it has its own vocabulary, its own rhythms, influenced by local languages. Sudanese Islam is not Saudi Islam or Turkish Islam, it has its own practices, its own emphases, shaped by Sufi traditions and local customs.

Sudanese visual culture draws on North African, Nile Valley,

and sub-Saharan aesthetics without needing to declare allegiance to one.

This hybridity, though that term itself can be problematic, is not weakness. It is strength. It is aesthetic intelligence.

It is the ability to draw from multiple sources, to synthesize without anxiety, to create something new that honors its antecedents without being limited by them. Sudanese Islamic aesthetics are remarkable precisely because they are not "pure," they are living, adaptive, responsive to local conditions while maintaining connection to broader Islamic worlds.

So the lens of Sand & Scripture offers an instruction for reading the rest of the book: do not treat Islam in Sudan as a mere overlay, and do not treat pre-Islamic continuities as something Islam "replaced." The aesthetic reality is more subtle. Islam reorganized and sanctified certain forms.

It refined and redirected certain protective practices. It introduced new textual and sonic regimes of beauty. But it did so within a land already aesthetically intelligent, already trained by environment, already fluent in pattern, already close to the unseen.

What emerges is not imitation. What emerges is a Sudanese visual theology: devotional, practical, communal, restrained, and deeply aware that beauty is not decoration. Beauty is discipline.

And now, because this is a Post-Interpretive book, we end with the ethical warning. Western institutions and contemporary cultural discourse often approach Islamic aesthetics with one of two violences: clinical flattening or sensationalist fear. The clinical voice reduces devotion into "motifs." The sensationalist voice reduces devotion into "threat." Both refuse moral proximity.

Both refuse to stand beside the work as living evidence. So if you read this chapter and find yourself tempted to categorize—Is this orthodox? Is this folk? Is this African? Is this Arab?—remember: those questions are often the mind's attempt to avoid presence. Presence is harder.

Presence requires you to see that people built these forms to live with God under difficult conditions, and that any reading which strips away that lived difficulty becomes a kind of theft.

Let the record show: in Sudan, scripture did not arrive to overwrite sand. It arrived to speak through it, until the land itself began to look like devotion, and devotion began to look like survival. And in that fusion, something emerged that was neither Arab imposition nor African resistance, but a third aesthetic, one that holds both legacies without choosing between them, one that makes beauty serve mercy, and one that understands that in a world of relentless rupture, pattern itself can be a form of prayer.

9

The Lens of Oral Memory: The Artwork That Walks Before the Pen

Sudan has always known something the modern world keeps forgetting: language is not only written. It is carried. It is sung. It is thrown across rooms in praise, in grief, in teasing, in warning, in prayer. It travels through the throat long before it travels through libraries. And when a culture is shaped by oral memory, its art does not behave like an illustration. It behaves like a voice. It doesn't sit still the way a page sits still. It walks. It arrives in rhythm. It repeats. It improvises. It shifts according to audience and circumstance. In such a world, the artwork is not primarily an object. It is an event of transmission.

Sudan's literary forms are older than the writing that records them. Long before the novel arrived as category, before the short story became a recognized form, literature here moved through voices. The *Ahaji*—the folk tale tradition—traveled through grandmothers before it traveled through books.

The *Madih*—praise poetry honoring the Prophet, performed communally with lead vocalist and responding chorus—circulated through memory and song before any manuscript

preserved it. And the oral poetic tradition that developed across northern Sudan was not rudimentary verse awaiting elevation. It was formally sophisticated: structured, rhythmically precise, carried in colloquial Sudanese Arabic as a living literary form with its own fully developed conventions.

This is why Sudanese art so often feels like it is carrying weight rather than displaying content. The West is trained to treat the visual as primary and the oral as secondary—sound as supplement, voice as ephemeral, performance as non-archival. But Sudan's aesthetic intelligence often reverses the hierarchy.

The oral is not decorative; it is foundational. It is how history survives when institutions fail. It is how lineage persists when paper is scarce, when archives are burned, when regimes rewrite records, when displacement fractures documentation.

The tongue becomes the first library. The body becomes the first museum. And when the tongue is the library, the visual arts inherit a distinct task: to hold rhythm, to hold recitation, to hold collective breath.

So we must approach Sudanese visual form with an ear, not only an eye. Because oral cultures encode knowledge through cadence. They stabilize memory through repetition, rhyme, and structure. A story that must survive across generations cannot rely on footnotes.

It must rely on music. It must rely on memorable pattern. *Madih* in Sudan is a tradition of sung praise for the Prophet Muhammad, performed at community gatherings and celebrations, most notably *Moulid* (an annual festival commemorating the birth of the prophet), with a lead vocalist and a responding chorus, often supported by handclaps from the audience.

This is why praise-singing traditions, poetic forms, chants, and communal recitations do not remain confined to "litera-

ture." They bleed into the visual. They teach the hand to repeat. They teach the eye to favor rhythm. They teach pattern to behave like a stanza. They teach color to act like emphasis. They teach composition to operate like a breath: pause, surge, pause again.

What made Sudanese recitation distinct was not only the text but the training ground. In the *khalwa*, children learned in unison until chanting became body memory. In the Sufi circle, repetition became indistinguishable from breath. The result was a recitational voice that belonged to more than one occasion—heard in the mosque, in the home, in the street, carrying the same disciplined cadence across every threshold.

In this sense, Sudanese art is often not representational in the naive Western way. It doesn't simply depict something. It recites something. It holds the cadence of a people.

This becomes especially visible in craft lineages: weaving, beadwork, henna, pottery, forms often dismissed as "women's work" or "folk practice" by institutions that mistake domestic survival for aesthetic inferiority. Yet these forms are, in oral cultures, central repositories of memory. A woven motif can be a proverb without words.

A repeated geometry can be a chant made visible. A color choice can signal lineage, region, marital status, ritual function. A pattern can carry a genealogy more efficiently than a written chart, because the pattern is embedded in practice, and practice is remembered through doing.

Oral memory does not store itself in abstraction; it stores itself in embodied repetition.

This is why the title of the chapter is "The artwork that walks before the pen." The pen is late. The pen arrives after the voice has already built a nation inside the body. The pen arrives after the praise singer has already mapped the moral universe.

The pen arrives after the mother has already taught pattern to the child without ever calling it art. The pen arrives after the community has already rehearsed its own survival as ritual, as song, as repetition. Written history, then, is not the origin of Sudanese meaning. It is one of its later garments.

And here we must speak of the *Hakamat,* not as exotic curiosity, but as evidence of oral tradition's aesthetic and political power. The *Hakamat* are poets and singers of Western Sudan—women whose power is specifically vocal, specifically communal, and specifically feared. To call them praise singers is too narrow. They also ridicule. They incite. They arbitrate.

A *Hakama* holds charisma, cultural knowledge, and the community's trust that her voice carries authority beyond performance. She is poet, singer, judge. Her verse defines community law without writing any of it down. She praises bravery. She shames cowardice. She honors generosity and satirizes self-interest.

She comments on events the community has no other institution to adjudicate. Many *Hakamat* are not formally literate, and this is part of their power: their authority is embodied, not institutional. It lives in presence, in voice, in the accumulated recognition that what she says matters. They preserve history not in documents but in bodies. They hold the community's story in the throat. Their art does not hang in a museum. It circulates, arbitrates, and—when the moral stakes demand it—starts wars.

This is oral power in its most concentrated form. The *Hakama's* voice can shift communal action, can shame men into battle or dissuade them from it, can define honor and cowardice, can preserve history and shape present conduct, all without writing a single word. This is aesthetic intelligence operating at

full political force.

Her art is not representation but intervention. Her performance is not entertainment but governance. Her memory-keeping is not archival nostalgia but living law.

The ethical complexity of the *Hakamat* tradition cannot be ignored. During the Darfur conflict, *Hakamats* were regularly used by tribal leaderships as a way of influencing communities, often in return for payment. When members of both groups were keen to avert bloodshed between the *Rizeigat* and *Fayreen* communities, it was the female singers who commanded most influence; on returning to their village, the *Fayreen* men who reached a peace agreement were confronted by groups of *Hakamat* singing songs about cowardice, removing their Islamic headscarves to indicate their lack of respect for the men and questioning their manhood, causing the men to take up arms and return to fight, resulting in dozens of deaths.

This is not a simple story of women's empowerment or cultural authenticity. It is a story of how oral tradition carries moral force, force that can be weaponized, manipulated, paid for. The *Hakamat* hold power precisely because their voices are trusted as carriers of communal values.

When those values prioritize warrior honor over peaceful resolution, the results can be catastrophic. Yet this same aesthetic-political force can be redirected. The *Hakamat* are beginning to sing songs of peace; this change has come because many *Hakamat* have paid a personal price for the violence, one singer confessed, "I already lost a brother... If I continue singing it could be a son this time round".

The point is not to romanticize or condemn the *Hakamat*. The point is to recognize what they reveal: that in oral cultures, art is never "just" aesthetic. It is infrastructural. It shapes

action. It holds memory. It defines morality. It can start wars or end them. And it does all of this without needing to be written down, because it lives in voice, in performance, in the communal recognition that certain voices carry weight.

The oral lens also changes how we understand authorship. Modern art history often fetishizes the individual genius, the signature, the biography, the solitary breakthrough. Oral cultures complicate this.

In oral transmission, creativity is often communal, iterative, and distributed. A song belongs to a lineage more than to a single author. A proverb is refined by use. A story is adjusted by each teller. This means Sudanese aesthetic forms may carry collective authorship even when an individual hand executes them. The pattern you see may not be "invented" by one person; it may be inherited, modified, and renewed.

The value lies not only in novelty but in fidelity, fidelity to the rhythm that keeps the community coherent.

The poet Najlaa Eltom describes being surrounded by poets "not in the traditional sense of published writers or those who take writing as a profession" but by "a different group of artists—those who composed songs about their daily lives, their children, and their grandchildren," her aunts who created verses spontaneously. Her mother did not compose herself, but "was constantly by the radio, immersed in Sudanese music and *Madih*, the local tradition of praising Prophet Muhammad," while her father "was deeply connected to poetry, often reciting verses written by relatives and friends; whenever he had something on his mind, he would express it through poetry rather than ordinary conversation."

This lens demands that the reader unlearn a certain Western hunger: the hunger for the single origin. Sudanese oral aes-

thetics often resist origin stories because they are not built for ownership. They are built for continuity.

Now consider the relationship between oral memory and space. Oral traditions are not only words; they are gatherings. They require bodies in proximity. They require shared time. They require a setting where voice can travel. This is why architecture and communal spaces in Sudan carry an aesthetic logic that is inseparable from sound.

Courtyards, open spaces, shaded areas, communal rooms, these are not neutral. They are acoustic infrastructures. They allow recitation, storytelling, praise-singing, and ritual to occur. Space becomes part of the oral archive. Architecture becomes a vessel for communal memory, not just shelter from heat.

When the oral is dominant, the visual is often designed to support it rather than replace it. Visual form becomes a mnemonic device: patterns that help memory, objects that anchor stories, symbols that trigger recitations. In such a world, the artwork is not fully "read" in silence. It is activated by speech. It becomes fully itself when someone speaks near it, when someone sings, when someone remembers aloud. Museums often fail Sudanese art because museums insist on silence as a default. But Sudanese aesthetics often include silence as a strategy, yes, yet they also include voice as lineage. The work is not always meant to be approached alone. It is often meant to be held in community.

Out of the praise-singing traditions of the 1930s, a new form emerged—*TumTum*, born in Kosti on the White Nile. Its lyrics held two registers at once: romance, and the difficulty of female life. The music was danceable. It spread through urban centers with the momentum of something people had already been waiting for.

The figures who shaped this era worked across composition, performance, and political commitment simultaneously. Abdallah Abdel Karim—known as Karouma—wrote with prolific intensity, his voice inseparable from the era's pulse. Ibrahim al-Abadi pushed its forms toward new possibility. And Khalil Farah did both: poet and singer, his song Azza fi Hawak threading lyric beauty through the live wire of the Sudanese national movement.

This lens also illuminates why Sudanese art can feel so intensely ethical. Oral cultures transmit not only history but values through story. Stories are not merely entertainment. They are moral rehearsal. They teach what to honor, what to fear, what to laugh at, what to grieve. They provide a people with a shared emotional grammar. When those story structures migrate into visual form, the art becomes saturated with communal ethics. A pattern is not neutral; it carries social memory. A color is not arbitrary; it carries relational meaning. A motif may be tied to a proverb or a spiritual teaching. The visual inherits the oral's responsibility: it becomes another way of teaching how to live.

By the time of the Mahdist uprising in the late 19th century, spoken-word poetry was already doing double labor—aesthetic and political simultaneously, naming events as they happened and shaping how communities would remember them. Among the popular vernacular poets of that period were two women: Bint al-Makkawi and Umm Misaymis. Not minor figures, not curiosities.

Women whose voices had sufficient force to move events. That tradition continued to evolve. By 2018, the same oral-political energy that had moved through praise-song and epic across centuries was moving through rap, through protest slogan,

through the digital channels the revolution ran on. The form changed. The function—the voice as weapon, as record, as communal orientation—did not. And now—because this book is also about rupture—we must say what happens when oral cultures meet modern catastrophe. War disrupts gatherings. Displacement breaks communities. Exile fragments shared contexts. When oral transmission is interrupted, the visual arts sometimes take on even greater archival responsibility. A painting may become a substitute for a story circle that can no longer gather.

A textile motif may become a portable homeland when the homeland is inaccessible. A poster may become a public chant when the chant is forbidden. In these moments, Sudanese art becomes not only aesthetic but infrastructural: it carries the oral archive forward when the oral conditions are endangered. This helps explain the emotional density of so much Sudanese work, even when it looks formally restrained. The restraint is not coldness. It is discipline. The work is carrying more than it shows, because it was trained by a culture where meaning is often carried rather than displayed. The viewer who expects immediate legibility will call it "subtle." The viewer with patience will recognize something more serious: the art is behaving like memory itself, partial, rhythmic, layered, unwilling to be summarized without violence.

Sudan is one of Africa's largest nations, and one of its most internally varied—linguistically, ethnically, religiously. Its literature carries that multiplicity. Poetry has always been the form nearest the country's pulse. To read Sudanese literary culture only through its Arabic inheritance is to read a river by its surface: it misses the underground tributaries, the oral lineages, the folktales and epic traditions that have shaped contemporary

writers whether or not those writers name their sources.

So let this chapter offer a new instruction: when you look at Sudanese art, listen for the oral beneath it. Listen for cadence in the pattern. Listen for pauses in the composition. Listen for repetition as refrain. Listen for the work's relationship to gathering and communal breath. Ask yourself what kind of voice the work carries, and what kind of silence it refuses. Because Sudanese art does not merely represent a culture that speaks.

It is one of the ways the culture continues to speak, even when the mouth is tired, even when the archive is threatened, even when the world has grown loud with other people's narratives.

Let the record show: in Sudan, the artwork often walks before the pen, because the first history was not written, it was carried in voice, and voice taught the visual how to endure. And in a world where institutions failed repeatedly, where archives burned, where regimes rewrote records, where displacement became chronic, the oral archive survived precisely because it lived in bodies, in rhythms, in performances that could be carried across borders and transmitted without permission from power. The artwork learned from this.

It learned to be portable. It learned to hold memory lightly enough to travel but firmly enough to remain recognizable. It learned that survival sometimes requires you to walk before you can afford to sit still and be written down.

10

The Lens of Architecture: Sudanese Space as Moral Instruction

A Sudanese building is rarely merely innocent.

It doesn't merely stand; it teaches. It instructs the body before it persuades the mind. It tells you where to lower your voice, where to pause, where to gather, where to endure heat without complaint, where to turn your face toward shade as if shade were a form of mercy.

In places where the environment is severe and history is unstable, architecture cannot afford to be a purely aesthetic performance. It must become ethics made material: shelter, discipline, protection, and social order joined into form. In Sudan, long before "spatial design" became a fashionable language of experience, space was already functioning as a kind of pedagogy. It taught people how to move, how to gather, how to withdraw, how to survive.

Much modern architectural discourse speaks in terms of style: this period, that influence, this movement, that façade. Sudanese vernacular architecture, in many of its older and regionally distinct forms, often speaks first through necessity.

A wall is not an idea before it is protection from sun. A courtyard is not merely an aesthetic flourish; it is a breathing device. A dome is not only symbol; it is a way of making weight, enclosure, heat, and air movement answer to form. A narrow opening is not stinginess; it is a negotiation with heat. The desert is an uncompromising critic, and it trains builders more rigorously than any academy.

It teaches that excess is not always luxury; sometimes it is risk. It teaches that bodily comfort is not indulgence; in harsh climates, it is survival. And when survival becomes a first design principle, a culture develops an architectural intelligence that is both humble and profound: humble because it submits to reality, profound because it turns submission into elegance.

What the environment demands, Sudanese builders have often answered with earth, shade, thickness, enclosure, and restraint. Heat encouraged thick walls: mud, stone, or brick dense enough to slow the day's punishment and release it gradually after sunset. In Nubian and other earthen-building contexts, limited timber availability, local materials, and inherited construction knowledge encouraged vaults and domes: not imported wood, but shaped earth, curved into forms that could hold themselves up through geometry. The land did not ask permission before teaching these lessons. It simply made some solutions more durable, more affordable, and more intelligent than others.

This is why Sudanese space can feel morally legible even before one knows the theory behind it. The space does not ask first for interpretation. It asks for comportment. You feel the difference between spectacle and shelter immediately. The building does not perform only for the passerby; it cares for the inhabitant. It does not merely flatter the eye; it protects the

breath.

In a world where modern architecture often becomes ego made concrete, Sudan's older spatial logics remind us of a forgotten truth: the most dignified building is not always the one that announces itself loudly, but the one that holds human life gently.

Consider the Nubian dome and vault: earth-colored, rounded, modest, structurally intelligent, and quietly resistant to the tyranny of imported "progress." What the Nubian vault teaches is this: shelter does not always require imported material in order to stand. Mud bricks, shaped and stacked with precision, generate their own structural logic. Each unit presses against the next; the curve distributes load without depending on timber formwork or metal reinforcement. The technique also responds to heat. Thick earthen materials and vaulted forms help moderate internal temperature, allowing the building to remain cooler not through imported machinery alone, but through the intelligence of mass, air, and shape.

Its beauty does not scream. It does not need the glass tower's arrogance. It is a form grown from climate, material availability, and the wisdom of centuries: how to make a home that stays cooler, how to build with what the land offers, how to create volume without waste, how to let air and shade become forms of mercy.

A dome is an argument the land makes against vanity. It is the desert teaching the architect: curve is not decoration; curve is intelligence. The dome does not merely cover; it contains. It shapes heat, sound, and communal life. It creates a soft sky inside the home. It reminds the body that shelter can be gentle without being weak.

When the Egyptian architect Hassan Fathy studied Nubian

building traditions and reintroduced the Nubian vault to modern architectural discourse, he recognized something industrial modernity had forgotten how to value: earth already knows how to make shelter. One does not always need to import what the ground already provides. His lesson was not nostalgia. It was correction.

And then there are the tukuls and other vernacular structures, forms often dismissed by outsiders as "simple" because the outsider mistakes European complexity for complexity itself. The tukul—round, thatched, mud-walled—appears across many Sudanese and regional vernacular contexts, especially where rainfall, vegetation, and local building traditions make that form intelligent. It is built from what grows nearby, from what the ground holds, from what needs no ship to deliver. The pitched roof answers rain. The circular form answers material, structure, repair, and use. Its ornament is not an afterthought; it is the building admitting that survival and beauty are not enemies.

But simplicity, in harsh climates, is often the highest sophistication. To build a structure that lasts, that cools, that gathers people, that can be repaired, that can be remade—this is not primitive. It is advanced in the only way that matters: it works.

Sudan's vernacular architecture is a living critique of the modern world's obsession with novelty. It suggests that the true measure of design is not how it photographs, but how it survives.

Across much of Sudan, one finds the rectangular or square earthen house often described as the bayt jalus: flat-roofed, built from dried clay, sun-dried mud brick, or plaster mixtures that may include organic materials such as cow dung, locally referred to in some sources as zibala. Wooden elements are used

sparingly, most often in roofs, windows, and doors. Earth is not used here as poverty alone, but as intelligence: the land teaches the builder what the land provides.

In parts of Sudanese vernacular architecture, especially in Nubian regions, walls may be elaborately painted with traditional designs. Houses are often square or rectangular, with flat roofs and terraces that allow life to continue under the pressures of heat. Such forms are not merely domestic containers; they are climatic instruments, social organizers, and visual declarations of belonging.

Survival, however, is never purely physical. It is also social. Architecture in Sudan is frequently an instrument of community: a way of organizing gathering, prayer, mourning, hospitality, and the rhythms of oral life. A shaded space is not merely shade; it is where stories travel. A courtyard is not merely open air; it is where family becomes audible. A threshold is not merely an entry; it is a moral line between public and intimate, between outer noise and inner coherence.

The home becomes a small cosmology. It teaches what to reveal and what to protect. It teaches that not everything belongs to the street. In societies marked by surveillance, political instability, or social pressure, this lesson becomes more than cultural preference. It becomes safety.

Many vernacular homes use thick walls, courtyards, shaded thresholds, and carefully managed openings for thermal regulation and social privacy. Walk near a Nubian house and you may see what this means in practice: vivid color on white plaster, geometric forms worked into walls, objects displayed as memory and address—a house speaking its lineage to everyone who passes.

This is why Sudanese architecture can become a silent com-

panion to the lens of withheld testimony. The space itself participates in restraint. It creates zones of privacy, layers of access, rooms that hold what cannot be said publicly.

The building becomes an accomplice in survival. It helps life continue without requiring life to become visible to strangers. In a world addicted to exposure—where even grief is demanded as content—Sudanese spatial ethics remind us that dignity sometimes requires concealment. Not concealment born of shame, but concealment born of reverence: the understanding that certain aspects of life are too sacred to be publicly handled.

Now place this within the spiritual geometry of Sudan. Mosques, zawiyas, tomb complexes, and sacred sites are not only religious structures; they are moral architectures. They discipline the body through orientation, repetition, and communal rhythm.

The vertical gesture of a minaret is not merely a skyline statement; it is a directional reminder. It says: attention must rise, even when life is heavy. In urban Sudan, the mosque and the minaret are not decoration. They help organize space spiritually. The dome says: gather beneath vastness. The minaret says: orient. The arabesque says: pattern is one way of approaching the infinite. Islam did not merely decorate Sudan's skyline; it reoriented its spatial imagination.

Yet Sudan is also a land of horizontality—the dune, the plain, the river's long sentence. Sacred architecture often exists as a dialogue between vertical devotion and horizontal endurance: rise toward God, but remain grounded in the earth's patience. This tension, between ascent and endurance, is one of Sudan's deepest aesthetic truths. You can feel it in the way sacred spaces are often both modest and intense. They do not always overwhelm with grandeur. They gather presence through

rhythm.

Tomb architecture, too, carries this moral geometry. The dead are not simply absent; they remain as social presence and spiritual reminder. The structure around death becomes a way of organizing memory into space, turning grief into form, turning remembrance into a physical location to which the living can return.

The qubbas, or gubbas—whitewashed domed tombs often made of adobe or mud brick and associated with saints, religious figures, or important personages—carry this logic. Modern Western monumentality often treats the tomb as a monument to the individual. Sudan's sacred spatial traditions often treat tombs as nodes in communal continuity, places where the living negotiate their relationship to history, lineage, mercy, and the unseen.

The space teaches how to grieve without collapsing, how to remember without theatricality.

Architecture also reveals the politics of water and scarcity. Where water is rare, seasonal, or contested, design becomes a record of resource ethics. The geometry of wells, the placement of courtyards, the organization of shade, the layout of settlements—these are not merely "vernacular charm." They are a material theology of scarcity: a way of living that acknowledges that resources are gifts, not guarantees.

Modern minimalism likes to claim philosophical elegance. Sudanese restraint, when born of scarcity, heat, and inherited environmental knowledge, is often more honest. It is not an aesthetic posture for magazines. It is a lived discipline. It teaches that "less" is not always a trend. Sometimes it is the only way a community stays alive. This is knowledge that cannot be designed in an office. The placement of vents, the thickness

of walls, the logic of shade and light—these are answers to questions the land asks repeatedly. They required centuries of conversation between builder and environment.

And so, if you want to understand Sudanese aesthetics, you must understand that the building is not separate from art. The building is one of the earliest arts. It is the earliest museum. It is the first framing device. It is the space where textiles hang, where oral memory circulates, where prayer repeats, where craft is stored, where families survive, where politics is held at the threshold, when it can be.

This is why I said earlier: Sudan built truth into walls before it wrote books. Not truth as ideology, but truth as lived instruction. The wall says: here is where the sun cannot reach you. The courtyard says: here is where community can breathe. The threshold says: here is where intimacy is protected. The dome says: here is how to make shelter intelligent. The sacred space says: here is how to orient your body when the world disorients your soul.

The capacity for complex urban form in this region is ancient. Kerma, whose development reaches back into the third millennium BCE, became one of the major urban and ceremonial centers of the Nile Valley. It contained monumental architecture, organized settlement, religious structures, and urban complexity long before many inherited histories of civilization learned to treat Africa as a primary site of architectural and urban invention rather than as background.

Its deffufa—a massive mud-brick ceremonial and religious structure, elevated above the surrounding settlement and associated in its surviving form with the later phases of Kerma's development—still stands. When you encounter it, understand what it tells you: this is not the origin of a tradition that

later became sophisticated. This is sophistication from the beginning.

If Western modernity often treats architecture as a performance of power, Sudanese spatial traditions often treat architecture as a discipline of mercy. Mercy toward the body: keeping it cool, shaded, and gathered. Mercy toward the community: allowing privacy, hospitality, ritual, and repair. Mercy toward the future: building in ways that can be maintained, adapted, rebuilt, and continued.

When architects such as Abdelmoneim Mustafa worked within the pressures of modern Sudanese architecture, they faced a collision. The mid-century brought concrete, the modernist grid, the orthogonal plan, and new institutional ambitions. These were not inherently wrong. But they arrived alongside cultural pressure to adopt imported aesthetics wholesale, to let reinforced concrete replace mud brick not only as material, but as logic. The challenge was not simply whether to use modern materials. The challenge was whether modernity could be made answerable to place.

Yet even as modernization arrived, the ethical lessons of traditional architecture remained relevant. The modern period revealed tensions: between imported materials and local resources, between air conditioning and passive cooling, between global aesthetics and local identity. Dependence on mechanical cooling is not merely an energy question. At times it is an architectural confession: the building admitting that it cannot regulate itself, that it must import comfort because it failed to produce it through form. Passive cooling intelligence, developed over centuries, was too often discarded in a generation—not because it failed, but because new wealth made its abandonment appear affordable.

This tension reveals architecture's ongoing moral task: to serve not power or fashion, but human flourishing under specific conditions. When buildings abandon climate intelligence for imported solutions, they abandon one of architecture's fundamental responsibilities: to make human life possible without destroying the systems that sustain it.

Let the record show: in Sudan, space is not a backdrop to art. It is one of art's oldest moral teachers, shaping how the body learns humility, how the community learns continuity, and how beauty learns to serve survival rather than spectacle.

The dome teaches that intelligence can be curved. The courtyard teaches that gathering requires breath. The threshold teaches that privacy is not shame but dignity. The thick wall teaches that protection from heat is a form of mercy. And the entire tradition teaches that the most sophisticated architecture is not the one that announces its complexity, but the one that makes life possible, generation after generation, without apology and without collapse.

11

The Lens of Craft: Inheritance in the Hands

The West calls it craft when it doesn't know how to kneel.

It reserves the word "art" for what can be framed, sold, hung under lights, and narrated by institutions that pretend neutrality while choosing winners. But Sudan has long understood a deeper hierarchy, one that modern museums often fail to recognize: the forms that keep people alive are not lesser. They are foundational.

In Sudan, weaving, pottery, dyeing, beadwork, henna, metalwork, jewelry, and domestic ornament are not peripheral aesthetic hobbies. They are the architecture of continuity. They are where beauty becomes practical, where memory becomes touch, where lineage becomes repeatable, where women—so often written out of "official" art histories—carry the aesthetic spine of culture with disciplined hands.

Craft, here, is not a category. It is a covenant.

A covenant between material and community, between the living and the dead, between the present moment and the inheritance that refuses to vanish. When a culture is shaped

by rupture—colonial borders, displacement, war, economic instability—the most reliable archive is often the one that can travel: the archive you can wear, carry, remake, repair.

A painting can be confiscated. A museum can be burned. A library can be censored. But a motif carried in a weaving tradition survives in bodies. A dye practice survives in hands. A bead pattern survives in domestic rhythm. The home becomes the safest museum because the home can move, and because what is transmitted through skill is harder to erase than what is stored in buildings.

Begin with weaving, because weaving is the mother of pattern and pattern is one of Sudan's most durable languages. Across Sudan's regions the craft lexicon is wide: pottery and metalwork and carving and weaving, each discipline shaped by what the specific land offers and what the specific community requires. Woven cotton moves between the everyday and the ceremonial—the galabiya worn daily, the cloth weighted with occasion, the textile that mediates between body, climate, modesty, and belonging.

The material does not merely serve the body. It carries something the body alone cannot hold: the accumulated decisions of people who made under pressure, and still made beautifully.

A woven textile is not merely "beautiful fabric." It is a social document, a memory device, sometimes a protective surface, sometimes a marker of identity, sometimes a ceremonial object, sometimes simply the labor of staying warm, staying clothed, staying dignified. In Darfur and other western Sudanese craft contexts, basket-making carries its own precise vocabulary of place. Local grasses, fibers, and plant materials become structure, surface, and pattern. The dyes and tones often read like a map of what the landscape provides: plant-based

reds and oranges, indigo blues where indigo traditions are present, acacia browns and blacks, earth colors drawn from the environment itself. This is color as geography. This is pattern as autobiography of the land.

The loom is a quiet philosophy: it teaches patience, repetition, and attentional discipline. It teaches that beauty is not an event but a process. It teaches that the hand must submit to rhythm. And rhythm—whether in dhikr, in oral tradition, in the Nile's cycles, in the desert's demands—is one of Sudan's oldest tutors. Weaving is therefore not merely craft. It is a cosmology enacted.

Consider what is actually happening when a woman weaves baskets in a Darfur market. She may have learned the motions from her mother or grandmother, which means the teaching preceded her own memory of having learned it. If she is widowed, displaced, or economically responsible for children, the basket becomes more than an object. It is sold. The income buys food, pays school fees, sustains a household. What passes between those hands is not merely skill. It is an economic engine, a survival structure, a form of insurance whose premium is patience and whose currency is thread, grass, fiber, and time.

This reveals what institutions often miss: craft is not supplementary income. In many lives, it is primary survival. It is how a grandmother transmits not only technique but livelihood to her granddaughter. It is how widowhood does not become destitution. It is how children attend school. This is aesthetic intelligence operating as social infrastructure.

Pottery, too, deserves to be approached with reverence rather than condescension. Earlier observers of Sudanese village pottery noted that pots were made by women in some communities primarily for use in their own households, and that a man's lack of pottery could be read as a sign of household incompleteness.

That observation—seemingly casual—reveals a profound truth: pottery was so integrated into women's domestic authority that its absence could signify not merely material lack, but social incompletion.

Clay is a humble material, and that humility is precisely what makes it sacred. Pottery is how water is held. How food is stored. How daily life becomes possible. The pot is the domestic answer to scarcity: a technology of containment. The zir—a large clay water jar cooled by its own porosity—holds water against the heat and, in some contexts, has also been used as a vessel for fermenting fasikh: fish cleaned, salted, sealed inside with textile, stored in darkness for one or two years until preservation completes what the climate alone cannot provide.

And when containment becomes vital, the vessel becomes ethically charged. A beautifully made pot is not simply "nice design." It is respect for life's fragility. It is the decision to craft the tools of survival with care rather than with negligence.

Much traditional pottery is said to echo naturally occurring forms, including gourds and other organic containers. This is not primitive imitation but sophisticated understanding: the forms that nature has already proven effective under harsh conditions become templates for human making. The gourd taught the pot. The land taught the hand.

There is a morality in well-made objects when the world is harsh. A pot can teach you that dignity is not reserved for ceremonies. Dignity belongs to daily bread.

The deeper history often placed pottery in women's hands—coil and mold techniques organized around domestic rhythms, transmitted through household practice across long spans of time. In many craft histories, the later movement toward wheel-thrown pottery and market specialization could also mark a

shift in gender, economy, and social function: from domestic production toward commercial production, from communal use toward market sale, from integrated life-practice toward specialized trade. This shift should not be simplified into a single universal law, but its pattern matters. It shows how technology can reorganize not only objects, but authority.

Then dyeing—indigo, earth tones, plant color, the language of color that belongs to place rather than palette theory. Dye is often discussed in art history as surface effect, as aesthetic choice. But in craft lineages, dye is also knowledge: knowledge of plants, water, timing, heat, fermentation, chemistry carried through tradition rather than laboratories.

It is environmental intimacy turned into color. Indigo, in particular, has a long, though uneven, history in Sudanese and Nubian textile contexts. Its presence in archaeological textiles and later cloth traditions suggests that blue was not simply a color but a technical achievement, a material memory, a sign that color itself could become an archive of local practice. A dyed garment can become a moving record of place.

The color is not merely seen; it is read by those who know its lineage. This is one of Sudan's quiet powers: the ability for the everyday to carry layers of meaning without needing explanation.

Henna is another misunderstood archive, precisely because it is ephemeral. Modern institutions tend to value permanence because permanence is collectible. But Sudanese aesthetic intelligence often values the temporary because the temporary is honest.

Henna is a geometry that lives on the body briefly, then fades. That fading is not failure. It is truth.

It mirrors the rhythm of life: ceremony, beauty, passing,

return. The body becomes the canvas, but not in the contemporary art sense of conceptual spectacle. The body becomes the site where celebration, protection, femininity, marriage, and belonging are made visible for a moment, then allowed to dissolve without panic.

There is a spiritual wisdom in this: to create beauty without insisting it must last forever. That is an aesthetic discipline modernity has largely forgotten.

Beadwork and jewelry take this even further: objects worn close to the body that function as social memory, status markers, protective tokens, and sometimes economic stability. Across Sudanese and South Sudanese communities, bead choice is not merely ornamental. The arrangement of color, which strands are worn and when, the age of the wearer, the social occasion, the region, the community—these together can constitute a legible language: lineage declared, age marked, wealth signaled, regional belonging announced.

In some communities, color does not decorate the event; it helps constitute the event. A child's birth, a marriage, a rite of passage, a public gathering—these moments are made visible through what is worn, repeated, gifted, inherited, and recognized. The body becomes a page, and ornament becomes a form of social writing.

The milaya belongs especially to this conversation about portable memory. In South Sudanese contexts, the milaya—a hand-embroidered bedsheet or textile often decorated with animals, flowers, domestic scenes, and local motifs—has become more than household cloth. In refugee settings such as Bidibidi in Uganda, women have carried, stitched, sold, and remade milayas as both memory and livelihood. Antelopes, birds, flowers, alligators, and other images become the complete

visual vocabulary of a world worth recording. When displacement came, women carried what could still carry home back to them: cloth, pattern, memory, skill.

This is craft as portable homeland. When you must flee with only what you can carry, the embroidered sheet becomes both memory and potential livelihood. The aesthetic object becomes survival tool. The decorative becomes structural.

In contexts where women's labor is undervalued by official institutions, adornment becomes one of the few domains where women can generate and control aesthetic authority. Jewelry can be inheritance, portable wealth, and a public language of identity all at once. The bead pattern can carry regional belonging. The metal object can carry ritual function. The ornament is not only "pretty." It is a system of economy, of memory, of social relation.

And then metalwork itself: forging, hammering, sharpening, the transformation of resistant matter into usable form. Among the Zande, whose communities extend across present-day South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, craft was often inseparable from force. Knives, spears, shields, and other objects were not merely tools of war; they were objects of mastery—evidence that a people's material intelligence can become its civilizational signature.

Alongside metalwork, Zande and neighboring regional craft traditions have included basketry, net weaving, pottery, carving, and other forms of material production. The hand moved across many forms, because the hand that can make is the hand that can survive.

Here the land's pedagogy returns again. Heat is not merely endured; it can be used. Metal is not merely hard; it can be disciplined. Scarcity is not only a hardship; it can become a

constraint that trains ingenuity. A culture that can turn earth, fiber, clay, metal, heat, and patience into objects of use and beauty is a culture that has mastered the ethics of material reality. This is not romantic craftsmanship. It is survival intelligence; what I would call functional beauty: beauty that earns its place by doing work.

Now we must confront the institutional failure that shadows this entire chapter: the failure of art history to treat craft as serious aesthetic thought. What the institutional category of Fine Arts excludes, Sudanese daily life holds centrally: the galabiya worn through Khartoum's heat, the turbans and skullcaps that mark male dignity in public space, the thoub draped across ceremony and ordinary morning, the leatherwork that mediates between the body and whatever ground it must stand on. Yet these are often relegated to "applied arts" or "material culture"—categories that sound neutral but function hierarchically.

When museums separate "fine art" from "craft," they often separate men's public production from women's domestic production, elite consumption from communal survival, collectable objects from living practice. This separation is not merely academic taxonomy. It is political.

It decides whose labor counts as culture. It decides which objects are archived and which are merely "used." It decides who becomes "artist" and who remains unnamed. In Sudan, where so much aesthetic intelligence has been carried through women's hands, that institutional separation becomes a form of erasure. It turns the culture's backbone into its footnote.

Mo Abbaro was a Sudanese ceramicist and potter who moved between institutions without letting institutions own him. Born in Sudan, he studied Fine and Applied Arts at Khartoum Tech-

nical Institute before going to London to study ceramics at the Central School of Arts and Crafts, followed by postgraduate work in industrial pottery design at North Staffordshire College of Ceramics. He returned to Sudan to teach ceramics for a period, then continued his career in Britain, where he taught for many years and exhibited internationally.

His work matters here because it complicates the false boundary between craft and art. Abbaro did not need to abandon clay in order to become serious. He made clay serious by allowing it to retain its intelligence. His ceramics carry the memory of vessel, curve, containment, and surface; they belong to the same moral world as the pot and the calabash, even when they stand within the gallery.

This is what it looks like when a craftsperson refuses to choose between inheritance and education: the choice becomes the form. And even when craft forms enter "fine art" institutions, they often do so by referencing—rather than continuing—the living traditions. The calabash shape becomes aesthetic citation rather than functional vessel. The basket becomes form rather than household tool. The pot becomes sculpture rather than container. That transformation can be beautiful, but it should not make us forget the intelligence of the object before it entered the gallery.

So this book refuses to treat craft as supplementary. It treats craft as one of Sudan's central archives. Not because it is quaint. Not because it is "authentic." But because it is where continuity has been most faithfully preserved, precisely because it remained tied to daily life rather than to institutional recognition. Craft survives by being needed. It is protected by its usefulness.

A painting can be burned as propaganda. A textile tradition

survives because people still need cloth. A pottery lineage survives because people still need vessels. A dye practice survives because people still need garments. A bead pattern survives because social life still needs symbols of relation. In other words: craft survives because it cannot be fully separated from living.

When women from South Sudan sit together to work—threading beads, stitching milayas, shaping baskets—something else happens alongside the making. The labor creates a room. A room with no soldiers, no checkpoints, no official narrative.

The talk that fills it is not political speech; it is social breath, the kind that keeps a person human. What they embroider is not merely craft. It is memory of the parts of life that violence did not reach—the wedding, the harvest, the child's first steps.

The milaya becomes proof that these things happened. That they were real.

This reveals craft's psychological function: it is not only economic survival or cultural transmission. It is therapeutic structure. It is the ritual of making as a counter to the chaos of war. It is the hand's memory of peace enacted in present time. The embroidered antelope is not nostalgia; it is active remembering, the refusal to let war become the only story the hands know how to tell.

This also changes how we understand Sudanese aesthetics as a whole. Sudan's beauty is not primarily museum beauty. It is lived beauty. It is beauty that appears in thresholds, in garments, in objects that are touched daily. It is beauty that does not demand the spectator's admiration because it is not made for spectators. It is made for a community.

That makes it ethically purer. Spectator-oriented beauty is

easily corrupted by performance. Communal beauty, tied to function, is often more disciplined. It has less room for vanity. It is judged by whether it holds.

And this brings us to a final doctrine: in Sudan, inheritance is not only bloodline. It is skill-line. It is the passing down of how to make.

How to dye. How to weave. How to mark. How to build.

These crafts do not merely reflect continuity—they are continuity. Each technique transmitted is a refusal to let rupture have the final word.

The skill carried in the hand is the archive that does not burn. When a culture transmits making, it transmits worldview. It transmits patience. It transmits attentional discipline. It transmits the belief that the world can be shaped with care even when the world is harsh.

That belief, in a postcolonial and wartime context, is not trivial. It is resistance. It is the refusal to become purely reactive. It is the insistence that the human can still create coherent form under pressure.

Let the record show: Sudanese craft is not lesser art; it is the aesthetic spine of survival, the archive carried in hands, and the proof that beauty, when it is disciplined, can keep a world intact. It is the grandmother teaching the granddaughter not merely how to weave but how to remain economically sovereign.

It is the potter teaching not merely how to shape clay but how dignity belongs to daily bread. It is the dyer teaching not merely how to create color but how environmental knowledge becomes inheritance. It is the henna artist teaching not merely how to pattern skin but how beauty can be truthful by acknowledging its own passing. It is the beadworker teaching not merely how to string ornament but how social memory can be worn close to

the heart.

And it is all of these practices, together, teaching that when institutions fail, when borders are drawn, when archives burn, when displacement scatters, the hands remember, and what the hands remember can be taught again, can be made again, can survive again.

12

The Lens of Migration: The Shadow Canon of Diaspora

Sudanese art has learned to make itself in transit.

Not as a romantic tale of the wandering artist, but as a structural fact: Cairo, London, Paris, the Gulf, Nairobi, Kampala, cities that become temporary studios because the homeland, too often, has been made difficult or dangerous for sustained making. Exile, here, is not a scenic detour. It is an imposed condition.

And when a condition repeats across generations, it stops being biography and becomes material. It enters the work the way dust enters lungs, quietly, continuously, shaping breath without asking permission.

After his release from prison, El-Salahi eventually chose departure: Doha first, then, many years later, Oxford. Each city a different kind of distance from Sudan, each move an exchange of one form of precarity for another. But despite his itinerant life, El-Salahi remained deeply attached to his roots. This is not simply the story of one artist's personal journey. It is part of a larger pattern: political pressure or threat, departure,

years in foreign cities where the work continues under strange light, eventual recognition in Europe or the United States, often arriving late, when the artist is already old enough for the danger of the work to be softened by history.

Diaspora produces a shadow canon: an archive made "elsewhere," yet tethered to Sudan by a cord of longing, anger, responsibility, and fracture. The diaspora artist works under a double sky. They paint beneath foreign light while their memory keeps replaying Sudan's sun.

They learn to translate their own instincts into environments that don't share the same sensory grammar. The result is a particular aesthetic of distance: forms that feel slightly displaced, images that carry a faint echo of a place that cannot be re-entered, patterns that behave like portable homes. Even when the work is formally confident, it is often metaphysically unsettled.

Exile trains the imagination to become a suitcase: organized, careful, portable, haunted.

The Qatar years, late 1970s into the 1980s and beyond were years of deliberate reduction. El-Salahi drew in black and white. Much of the world that admired his earlier work did not know precisely where he was, or how intensely he continued to work.

He would later describe distance as something close to relief: no audience pressing its expectations on the work, no institution watching, no immediate demand to perform Sudanese identity for anyone. Space, finally, to become more experimental. This relief, the ability to work without being constantly watched, without being expected to function as a national emblem is one of exile's paradoxical gifts.

Yet it comes at the cost of invisibility, of working in a space where the work is not always recorded by the institutions that

claim to archive a culture's history. Qatar offered safety, time, and material resources. But it also placed the work outside the most powerful circuits of art-historical recognition.

The admirers who didn't know El-Salahi was there were not necessarily ignoring him. Often, they simply had no way to track an artist working outside the established circuits of recognition.

This invisibility is structural, not accidental. The art world operates through networks: galleries know artists, critics know galleries, museums know critics. When you work outside these networks, when you work in Doha while many of the validating networks are in New York, London, Paris, and later the Gulf's formal institutions, you can functionally disappear. Your work continues, but it does not always register. You become a ghost in your own career, making substantial bodies of work that may not be "discovered" until someone with institutional access happens to find you.

His palette became a form of faithfulness. He often worked with black, white, burnt sienna, yellow ochre—colors that recall earth, skin, calligraphy, and Sudanese visual memory. The constraint added depth, technically. But it also said something else: displacement cannot instruct you to forget what color meant at home. Even in Qatar, even later in Oxford, the earth tones travel.

The visual memory of skin and soil becomes the portable archive. This is not nostalgia. It is the stubborn insistence that displacement cannot erase origin. But notice what this requires: the constant mental translation of painting Sudanese earth tones while looking at another landscape, of maintaining visual fidelity to a place one can no longer safely or consistently inhabit, of keeping an aesthetic vocabulary anchored to a homeland that exists partly in memory. The work becomes a bridge between

the body's location and the mind's home. The canvas becomes the only place where these two geographies can coexist.

And then comes the burden of representation, that cruel gift exile gives the artist. The moment you leave, you become a spokesperson in the eyes of those who do not want to do the work of knowing Sudan beyond headlines. Your name becomes an entry point to a whole country.

Your paintings are asked to carry a nation's complexity as if the canvas were obligated to be diplomatic. You are invited to speak, exhibit, explain, but what is being requested is often not dialogue. It is a simplified Sudan that can be consumed.

A Sudan of tragedy neatly packaged. A Sudan of "resilience" that flatters the viewer's conscience. Exile does not only relocate the body; it relocates the gaze. It places the artist inside foreign appetite.

In 2013, Tate Modern finally arrived: around one hundred works, five decades, and a landmark retrospective widely described as Tate Modern's first major exhibition devoted to an African modernist, and one of the first major British institutional recognitions of El-Salahi's full achievement. The exhibition was framed as revelation: a significant figure in African and Arab Modernism, now placed within a broader global art history.

Notice what that framing requires.

The institution arrives last. It names what it finds. It calls the naming recognition.

This recognition coming when the artist was in his eighties reveals how institutions often fail diaspora artists until their work becomes historically "safe," until it can be celebrated without fully confronting the systems that delayed its reception.

The Tate retrospective was honor, and it was overdue recog-

nition. It was also a symptom of how institutions manage belatedness.

By 2013, El-Salahi was old enough, established enough, and far enough from the immediate political dangers of the 1960s and 1970s that his work could be celebrated through the language of historical importance. The revolutionary potential of his earlier work could be safely historicized. The prison drawings and the works that emerged from incarceration could be displayed as testimony to past trauma, rather than as present accusation.

The institution could congratulate itself on expansion without having to confront why it took so long to recognize one of the major modernists living partly within its own orbit.

This pattern repeats across diaspora experience: institutions ignore artists while they are actively making difficult work, then "discover" them when history has softened the risk. The retrospective becomes both tribute and correction. It honors, but it also reveals neglect. "Look, we include African artists," the institution seems to say. But inclusion that arrives late can function almost like burial: a way to archive the artist into history without changing the structures that made the delay possible.

This is why diaspora artists often create under a double audience: home and elsewhere. Home watches with suspicion: Have you abandoned us? Have you softened? Have you become a foreign product? Elsewhere watches with hunger: Perform your origin. Give us your pain in a form we can understand.

Between suspicion and hunger, the artist must invent a third posture: fidelity without propaganda, visibility without surrender.

Many Sudanese works in diaspora therefore develop a disci-

plined ambiguity. They refuse to become simple. They refuse to become easily captioned. They refuse to be reduced to either nostalgia or indictment. They do not deny the homeland, but they do not allow the homeland to be turned into a marketing identity. The work maintains a kind of opacity, not because the artist is being deliberately obscure, but because opacity is one way to avoid being consumed by either audience's hunger.

Since the outbreak of the current war in Sudan in April 2023, Cairo and other Egyptian cities have become major gathering points for Sudanese creative exile: filmmakers, musicians, writers, heritage workers, photographers, designers, cultural researchers, and artists trying to remake working lives amid displacement. To spend time among them is to understand something about what endurance actually costs—not the dramatic breaking, but the sustained pressure of breathing for a country you cannot safely return to, of keeping Sudan alive in rooms that were never designed to hold it.

This phrase "breathe for Sudan in exile" captures something essential about diaspora's burden. The artist becomes a kind of lung for the homeland, processing air that Sudan itself cannot breathe safely. They take in the foreign atmosphere, extract what can be used, expel what is toxic, and somehow keep producing the oxygen of culture.

But lungs can collapse under too much pressure. The expectation to represent an entire nation is exhausting. The artist must constantly negotiate: how much do I carry? How much can I refuse to carry? What is solidarity and what is self-erasure?

Cairo has become particularly significant as a site of Sudanese creative exile. It is close enough to Sudan to maintain connections, far enough to escape immediate danger, large enough to offer some infrastructure for artists to work, and, for some,

relatively more survivable than other cities. But Cairo is also precarious. Many Sudanese refugees and displaced artists there face legal uncertainty, economic exploitation, social discrimination, and the daily fragility of temporary arrangement.

Egypt offers proximity, but proximity is not protection. Artists work knowing that status can be provisional, that money can vanish, that housing can be unstable, that visibility can bring opportunity and exposure at once.

Abushariaa Ahmed's trajectory reads as the careful construction of a working life that Sudan could not at that moment hold: departure in the mid-nineties, years connected to Nairobi and the Paa ya Paa Arts Centre, a short period in Cologne, then a longer settlement in Kampala from around 2000, where he built a full-time artistic practice. His path, like many diaspora paths, was not a single migration but a sequence of temporary rooms each one offering walls he could paint, networks he could enter, and enough stability to continue.

This trajectory—Khartoum to Nairobi to Cologne to Kampala, with continuing ties to Sudan—illustrates how diaspora is often not one departure but a series of attempts to find stable ground. Each move reshapes the work. Each city leaves its mark. The artist becomes a palimpsest of places, carrying traces of every location in his aesthetic vocabulary. Nairobi offers one kind of artistic community, Cologne another, Kampala a third. The artist learns to code-switch not just linguistically but visually, adapting the work to whatever context offers the best chance of survival and making.

Salah Elmur arrived in the world in 1966 near the Blue Nile, in the Khartoum region—water as first visual education. He graduated in graphic design in 1989, the same year the coup remade Sudan's political sky. The years after the coup brought

pressure, arrest, and departure. Nairobi came first; Cairo came later. The Blue Nile remained, present in the work even when the work was made nowhere near it.

His mid-1990s departure marks a particular generation: artists who came of age during or after the 1989 coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power. For these artists, the decision to leave was not always about a single crisis. It was often about the long-term impossibility of working under a regime that viewed cultural production with suspicion and narrowed the space of public expression.

Distance also changes memory in specific ways. Memory is not a stable recording; it is reconstructed each time we access it, and the context of reconstruction shapes what we remember. An artist in exile reconstructs Sudanese memory through foreign frameworks. They remember Sudan while living in Cairo, and Cairo's dust, Cairo's light, Cairo's social dynamics, Cairo's political atmosphere inevitably color what they remember. The Sudan of memory becomes partly Egyptianized, partly imaginary.

This can sharpen certain details until they become almost religious: the exact quality of Khartoum's light at certain hours, the smell of dust after rain, the sound of the call to prayer echoing across neighborhoods. These details become precious because they are what remains. They get polished through repeated remembering until they shine with an intensity they may not have had when one actually lived there.

But distance also blurs. The daily irritations fade. Petty conflicts become irrelevant. The aspects of Sudanese life that drove departure can become softened, romanticized, excused. Exile can cause the homeland to become myth: too pure, too painful, too symbolic. Every problem becomes the regime's

fault. Every difficulty becomes political oppression. The complexity of ordinary social life—the ways people can be kind and cruel for reasons that have nothing to do with the state—can fade.

Or it can go the other direction. Exile can cause the homeland to become indictment: too oppressive, too disappointing, too heavy to return to without rage. Distance reveals patterns that proximity normalized. You see more clearly how women are constrained, how ethnic hierarchies operate, how religious authority polices daily life. Things once accepted as "just how it is" suddenly become intolerable when viewed from outside. You become angry at a version of home that perhaps never existed as monolithically as memory now insists.

Both distortions leak into the work: either through overidealization or through severe austerity. Yet the most honest diaspora works do something more difficult: they permit contradiction. They allow Sudan to remain complicated. They allow love and anger to share the same surface. They accept that home can be both wound and devotion.

When El-Salahi was serving in Sudan's Ministry of Culture and Information, the state that employed him imprisoned him. Six months without trial, in a cell where he made drawings on small cement casings and buried them in sand before guards could approach. What came after was departure. Doha. Later Oxford. A palette stripped to black, white, and earth. And eventually *The Inevitable*—vast, fractured, refusing to aestheticize Sudan's civil war, a monumental work that absorbed chaos without making it beautiful, that bore witness without pretending the witness was safe.

The chaos in *The Inevitable* mirrors the chaos of the homeland, but it is chaos mediated by distance, by memory, by political

rupture, by the impossibility of full return. This is exile's particular torment: to witness your homeland's suffering from a position of relative safety, unable to intervene, unable to fully grieve because you are not there, unable to fully celebrate safety because your people are not safe. The work becomes a container for this impossible emotional position.

It carries both the chaos of Sudan and the guilty safety of exile. It refuses to choose between them.

El-Salahi's memoir charts a geography of conversation—Khartoum, London, São Paulo, New York, Doha—and in each city, encounters that were never accidental. Hale Woodruff. Jacob Lawrence. The Spiral Group, navigating Blackness and modernism during the Civil Rights era. Elijah Muhammad. Rufino Tamayo.

What unites these figures across their vast differences is the question El-Salahi carried across every border: how does an artist make work that is African, modern, and unmistakably itself without allowing any of those adjectives to become a cage?

This global network becomes part of diaspora's possibility: exposure to conversations, movements, and aesthetics that might not have been available in Khartoum. El-Salahi's encounters with African American modernists offered him models for how to navigate being simultaneously African and modern, how to claim modernism without accepting its Eurocentrism. The Spiral Group in particular—Black American artists grappling with identity, politics, and representation during the Civil Rights era—offered a parallel struggle to his own attempts to define Sudanese modernism.

But these encounters are always haunted by the question: why did one have to leave to access this? The artist carries a quiet drumbeat of resentment beneath the gratitude. Resentment not

at the opportunities, but at the fact that opportunity required departure, that growth required loss, that to become the artist he needed to be, El-Salahi had to move away from the country he wanted to serve.

There is also the material reality of diaspora work. El-Salahi's early movement was scholarship-shaped: the Slade School in London from 1954 to 1957, then a UNESCO fellowship to the United States in 1962, then travel and study across the Americas in the 1960s. These institutions paid for crossings.

None of them could have anticipated what he would do with the distances they enabled. Scholarships, grants, and fellowships can enable the work, but they also create dependencies. The diaspora artist often relies on foreign institutions for support that should, in a just world, be available at home.

This creates complicated loyalties. You are grateful for the fellowship, the residency, the invitation, the visa, the studio, the grant. But you are also aware that institutional support is never neutral. It brings networks, expectations, languages, and frames. To accept support is often to enter someone else's grammar of value.

The practical challenges are mundane but constant. Shipping artwork across borders is expensive and complicated. Customs can damage work or hold it indefinitely. Storage is expensive when you do not have a permanent home. Insurance is often unaffordable. Materials may not be available in the new location, or they may be prohibitively expensive. The studio one can afford may be smaller, darker, colder, or more provisional than what the work requires. Artists work around these constraints, but the constraints shape the work. They limit scale, determine medium, influence process.

There is also the language barrier, even for artists working

primarily in visual media. Gallery contracts are in English, French, Arabic, or another administrative language of the host country, and mistranslation can be costly. Artist statements need to be written in the language of wherever one is exhibiting. The artist has to explain the work in frameworks the local art world understands, which means translating not just words but entire conceptual systems. The intellectual labor of this translation is immense and usually uncredited.

Return is not a single question but a calculation that changes with each generation, each war, each set of roots laid down in foreign soil. Ibrahim Shaddad, one of the key figures of Sudanese cinema, active across the country's fragile cinematic decades and later forced into exile has repeatedly insisted on the necessity of Sudanese cinema being made from lived proximity to Sudan, not merely from distant representation.

Not nostalgia. Precision: Sudanese cinema cannot only be made as an idea from afar. The country must be inhabited in the body—lived and breathed—or the work risks becoming about Sudan rather than of it.

This generational split runs deep through diaspora communities. The older generation, who remember Sudan before certain ruptures—before al-Bashir, before South Sudan's separation, before the current war—carry memory of a Sudan that younger generations may never have experienced. They feel a moral obligation to return, to rebuild, to not let the homeland die in exile. Their art often carries this obligation, this sense of debt to the dead, to the ancestors, to the idea of Sudan itself.

But younger generations face a different calculation. Many have spent more years outside Sudan than inside it. They have built careers, relationships, families in the diaspora. Their children may not speak Arabic fluently, or may speak another

Arabic than the one that carries Sudanese intimacy. Return is not simple homecoming. It would be another displacement, this time from the life they have built.

And return to what? To a country at war? To a collapsed economy? To a political system that has not resolved the conditions that forced departure?

Neither position is wrong. Both are attempts to solve an impossible problem: how to remain Sudanese when Sudan itself is fractured, unsafe, or inaccessible. The art made under these different pressures differs accordingly.

Older artists' work often carries explicit commitment to return, to national project, to Sudan's future. Younger artists' work may be more ambivalent, more global in reference, less bound to specifically Sudanese contexts. This can look like abandonment to the older generation. To the younger generation, it looks like survival.

The shadow canon, then, is not monolithic. It contains multiple generations, multiple cities, multiple relationships to homeland. What unifies it is the fact of having been made elsewhere, under the specific pressures of displacement. This gives the work certain shared characteristics: a heightened attention to memory, a tendency toward portable symbols—pattern, color, motif that can travel—a certain defensive opacity, and an underlying tension between presence and absence, between here and there.

So we state it cleanly, as demanded: exile is not an accident in Sudanese art; it is a material. It behaves like pigment. It behaves like cloth. It behaves like breath. It conditions the work's rhythm, its guardedness, its longing, its refusal to be fully legible. It teaches the artist to build portable altars out of pattern and silence. It teaches the work to survive in rooms that

were never meant to hold Sudan. It creates an archive that is scattered but not broken, displaced but not destroyed, distant but not disconnected.

Let the record show: the shadow canon is not lesser than the homeland canon. Often, it is the homeland's continuation by other means: an archive made under foreign ceilings because the original roof was set on fire. And when institutions finally recognize this work, when retrospectives finally happen, when the art market finally pays attention, this recognition should not erase the decades of neglect that preceded it. The shadow canon survived without institutional support.

It will continue after institutional attention fades. Because it was never made only for institutions. It was made to keep Sudan alive in the bodies and minds of those forced to live elsewhere. That work continues, regardless of who is watching.

13

The Lens of Rupture: The Hand Continues

War is a force that attempts to erase the human by making the human routine.

It turns suffering into statistics, and bodies into "developments," and villages into "zones," and grief into a headline that expires. Sudanese art after war does not always "respond" to this, because response implies a safe distance, implies the luxury of reflection after the fact. Often the art is made inside the rupture, with shaking hands, limited materials, and a reality that does not pause to allow aesthetic reflection.

Under such conditions, a drawing is not merely a drawing. It is proof that someone still had enough interior life left to mark a surface.

Children who had survived violence in Darfur were given paper and crayons and asked to draw. They drew what they had survived: Janjaweed on horseback, Sudanese Armed Forces in vehicles mounted with guns, green uniforms, burning, flight. These were not illustrations. They were depositions—specific, unmediated testimony that adult witnesses could not always

safely provide. The drawings were taken to the International Criminal Court and accepted as contextual evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Darfur case, including proceedings connected to former President Omar al-Bashir and other high-level suspects. The Darfur drawings are now held by The Wiener Holocaust Library, placing a child's crayon in an institution devoted to the documentation of genocide and mass atrocity.

Not metaphor. Accounting.

Let that sink in: children's drawings as contextual evidence at The Hague. Not as illustration, not as emotional supplement to "real" evidence, but as documentation of atrocity that could speak where conventional testimony was dangerous, broken, or inaccessible. The drawing becomes legal trace. The child's hand becomes witness. This is not metaphor. This is the literal transformation of mark-making into testimony under conditions where traditional testimony has been made perilous.

In refugee camps, where the world becomes tent geometry and time becomes waiting, drawings often appear as the first act of reclaiming shape. The child draws because the child must insist that imagination still exists, that the mind can still make something that was not there before, that interior life continues despite external devastation. The adult draws because the adult must insist that memory still has a place to land, that what happened can be recorded even if it cannot yet be spoken, that the act of making marks on paper is an act of continuing to be human.

These gestures are not cute. They are not heartwarming stories of resilience for outsiders to consume. They are evidence. They are the human refusing to be reduced to bare survival alone. The pencil becomes a fragile tool of dignity, and dignity

here is not an abstract philosophical concept; it is the concrete insistence that you remain a person who can make things, not just a body that consumes aid and waits.

One young boy's drawing depicts the attack on his village, carried out by Janjaweed forces on horseback and Sudanese Armed Forces in vehicles mounted with machine guns and tanks; the attackers are shown wearing green military uniforms. A separate drawing obtained after the June 3, 2019 Khartoum massacre, made by an eight-year-old girl who witnessed the violence outside military headquarters, records the massacre through a child's hand. Another Waging Peace description of children's drawings from Sudan shows two distinct events: in the upper portion, a Sudanese Armed Forces soldier on a pickup truck mounted with a machine gun shooting at a woman fetching water from a borehole; in the lower portion, a plane bombing a herder accompanied by his goats.

Look at what these children record: not vague trauma, not abstract violence, but specific tactical information. The Janjaweed arrive on horseback. The SAF use mounted guns. The attackers wear green uniforms. A woman is fetching water when she is shot, which means she is engaged in the most basic act of survival. A herder is with his goats, which means the violence touches not only bodies but livelihoods. These drawings record the destruction of civilian life at the level of gesture, labor, food, water, animal, road, and flight.

These are not "war drawings" in the sense that they aestheticize violence or transform it into spectacle. They are testimony drawn by those who survived what should never have been survivable. The child's hand shakes but continues. The line is uneven but present. The proportions are off but the information is precise. This is what war looks like when filtered through a

child's need to make sense of senselessness, to give shape to what has no shape, to create a record when official records are being deliberately destroyed.

The drawings operate in a strange legal and aesthetic category. They are evidence but also art. They are documentation but also expression.

They must be accurate enough to be credible, but they bear all the marks of being made by untrained hands under traumatic conditions. How do you evaluate such work? Standard aesthetic criteria—composition, technique, originality—become obscene when applied as if these were ordinary objects of judgment.

Yet to refuse all aesthetic consideration is to deny that these children were making intentional marks, exercising agency, creating something.

The ethical challenge for anyone viewing these drawings is to hold both dimensions simultaneously: this is testimony of atrocity and must be treated with the seriousness that demands; this is also a child's artwork and must be honored as an act of creation under impossible circumstances. To collapse it into only testimony erases the child's agency as maker. To treat it as only artwork erases the political and legal weight it must carry.

What began in December 2018 as rage against bread prices, against the cruel banality of a government that could not feed its people became, by April 2019, something that shook the foundations of thirty years. And in the space between rage and revolution, art moved in. Not as commentary. As participation. Walls became the first public forum that could not easily be shut down. Pavements spoke. Any surface that could hold paint became a message.

The shift from camp drawings to revolution murals marks a shift in war's phase: from active violence to active resistance,

from recording atrocity to organizing against it. The revolution art operates differently from the children's drawings. It is public, deliberate, strategic. It makes art a tool of political mobilization. It understands beauty as weapon and wall as broadcast medium.

The iconography did not need to be subtle. Chains—because thirty years of al-Bashir is not subtle. Doves—because peace in Sudan has never simply meant absence of conflict; it has meant the end of a particular machinery of violence. The faces of people from across the country—because the revolution's claim was that it belonged to all of them, not just the urban center that foreign cameras could reach.

The revolution iconography developed rapidly into a shared visual language. Certain symbols became widespread: breaking chains as a sign of liberation; the dove as a sign of peace; the Kandaka figure, invoking Nubian queens and women's leadership; the blue painted nail that emerged as a solidarity symbol after the killing of Mohamed Mattar; and the Sudanese flag colors, alongside other palettes that marked grief, anger, and political position.

This visual vocabulary allowed for rapid communication across ethnic, regional, and linguistic divides. When official media cannot be trusted, when the internet is shut down or throttled, when organizing openly is dangerous, visual symbols painted on walls become infrastructure. They mark gathering, memory, refusal. They commemorate martyrs. They provide rallying points. They document what is happening in real time.

On the exterior wall of a Khartoum morgue—peach-painted, hospital-adjacent, unremarkable from a distance—a spray-painted corpse-hand emerges from the earth. The fingernails are green. On one finger hangs a tag bearing one word: missing. Inside the building, approximately 200 bodies remained, many

of them unidentified protesters from the 2019 revolution. The smell of decomposition reached the street because power cuts repeatedly disabled the refrigerators inside. The mural was created by street artist Medo Kagonka, one of the Khartoum artists whose work became politically charged during and after the revolution.

The morgue mural operates at the intersection of art, memorial, and accusation. It is not decoration. It is not even primarily aesthetic.

It is a public counter to state suppression of information. When official institutions fail to identify the dead, fail to notify families, or fail to allow proper burial, the street artist steps in. The mural becomes a grave marker in a city where many families are denied the ordinary mercy of certainty.

It becomes the public record of death that the state wants to hide.

The "missing" tag mimics morgue identification tags but turns them into accusation. These bodies are not simply dead; their identities have been suspended, their families kept in agonized uncertainty. The mural makes this suppression visible. The green fingernails, without needing a single fixed interpretation, darken the image into a hand that is neither living nor properly buried. It is a hand that returns from the ground because the living refused to name it.

And the smell matters. The mural exists in a place where decomposition reaches the street. It does not let you have aesthetic distance. You cannot view it purely visually. The air implicates your body, forces you to physically experience proximity to the violence and neglect being named. This is art that does not merely represent sensory experience; it is embedded in it.

Assil Diab—who works under the name SudaLove—paints the faces of murdered protesters on walls near their homes. Not in galleries. On exterior walls in neighborhoods where families still live, where security forces still patrol. She returned from Qatar during the revolution and began painting martyrs' portraits on the walls of the buildings where they had lived.

The choice of location is the argument: these deaths are to be publicly acknowledged, their erasure refused. In one instance, when security forces threatened her while she was working, the family of the deceased formed a human wall around her so she could finish. She called it "a defiant show of strength."

It was also something more: a community using its body as the only institution available, when every official institution had already failed.

This scene encapsulates something essential about war art's social function: the artist painting the face of a martyr near his home while his family stands guard against the forces who might erase him twice. This is not individual artistic expression alone. This is collective action that uses art as its medium.

The painting is made possible by community protection. The community protection is organized around artistic commemoration. Neither can happen without the other.

The family forming a human wall around the artist reveals that they understand the mural as necessary work, as work worth risking further violence to complete. They recognize that having their son's face painted near their home is a form of justice when legal justice is absent or delayed. It allows them to publicly grieve when public grief has been criminalized. It marks his death as murder, not as accident; as political killing, not unfortunate incident.

For Diab, painting these portraits was a conscious choice to

enter danger. Women painting street art during and after the revolution faced specific risks. Before Sudan repealed its Public Order Law in November 2019, women's appearance and behavior in public could be policed. Diab herself worried that wearing baggy trousers could get her into trouble with the police while she painted. Her choice to paint anyway—with her technicolor spray-paint bag and pink gas mask—was not romantic courage. It was deliberate political risk.

The protests that began in December 2018 carried one demand: that thirty years of Bashir end. By April 2019, they had succeeded, which is to say, they had removed one ruler while power remained contested by men in uniform. Then June 3, 2019 arrived: the sit-in site turned killing ground, the military and security forces demonstrating that removal is not liberation. Artists recorded it in real time, their work turning darker with each death, more precise with each atrocity, more urgent as the world looked away.

The timeline matters: protests began in December 2018, Bashir was removed in April 2019, and the sit-in was violently dispersed on June 3, 2019. The art evolves through these phases. Early protest art is hopeful: breaking chains, doves, future-oriented symbols. Post-Bashir art becomes more complex as it becomes clear that military power has not disappeared. Post-massacre art turns darker, angrier, more explicitly accusatory. The visual language has to adapt to changing political reality; it has to serve changing movement needs.

Mohammed Elmekki built his practice around distribution—graphics designed for phone screens, for rapid sharing, for the compressed attention of a population following events in real time. His framing was unambiguous: the work was duty, not self-expression. As a young Sudanese artist who believed in

what the revolution was doing, he treated amplification and documentation as obligation, keeping visual pressure from becoming invisible.

The artist's language here is significant: duty, not opportunity. This is art made under moral obligation. The work does not ask only, "How can I express myself?" It asks, "How can I serve the movement?" The artist becomes a node in a network of communication, using design to spread information, commemorate martyrs, organize resistance, and maintain morale.

Elmekki's graphics function as applied aesthetics: beauty weaponized for specific political ends. They are designed for rapid social media distribution: high contrast, bold shapes, limited text, powerful imagery that reads quickly even on small phone screens. They are designed to be screenshotted, shared, and reshared until they saturate digital space. They are designed to work within the material constraints of digital circulation: low bandwidth, interrupted access, compressed attention, and fear.

This requires thinking about aesthetics in relation to infrastructure. The most beautiful mural in the world does little politically if it cannot be seen, photographed, remembered, or circulated. The most powerful graphic does little if it cannot load. Revolution art under censorship has to understand the material constraints of distribution and design accordingly.

Galal Yousif had already been painting women's lives before the revolution gave the walls a new urgency. His practice came from inside Sudanese social pressure, not from the safe distance of an observer. When the protests began, the work absorbed that pressure without abandoning its original concern: the revolution was also a demand for women's freedom, not only

the removal of a dictator. Reporting from 2019 described Galal's murals at the sit-in, many of them showing gaunt figures in Sudanese garments with red lines crossing their mouths, symbols of censorship and oppression.

He described going into the streets and painting as a way to heal, to break fear, and to document what was happening. The painting was not supplementary to the uprising. It was among its central arguments.

This is art as healing technology. But healing here does not mean only private therapeutic recovery. It means collective repair, the community painting itself back into coherence after violence tried to scatter it. The street art becomes a shared language, a visual vocabulary through which people who might not trust words can still communicate hope, rage, dignity, solidarity.

The breaking of fear is key. Fear under dictatorship is not just an internal emotion. It is political technology.

The regime maintains power partly through fear, through making people too afraid to gather, too afraid to speak, too afraid to imagine alternatives. Street art breaks this fear not by eliminating danger—danger remains real—but by making visible that others are also unafraid, that one is not alone, that the regime's power to frighten is not absolute.

When an artist paints a mural in public daylight, he demonstrates that public political expression is possible. When crowds gather to watch, they demonstrate that public gathering is possible. When people photograph the work and share it, they demonstrate that communication networks exist outside state control. Each of these demonstrations chips away at fear's power.

The documentation function is equally crucial. Art becomes

a way to document what is happening because official documentation is controlled, censored, incomplete, or falsified. The revolution murals become counter-archive, parallel record, proof that things happened that the state may later deny. Future histories of the 2019 revolution will depend partly on these images because official records will be partial at best and politically contaminated at worst.

The walls of Khartoum changed faster than the government could respond. Murals appeared overnight. Posters were rephotographed and circulated before the paste dried. Graffiti spoke names that had been kept quiet for thirty years. The city's surfaces became its most honest newspaper—a counter-archive running parallel to official silence, faster than state censors, louder than any press release.

The tightly controlled public sphere is not an overstatement. Under Bashir, public space was monitored; public criticism of the government was dangerous; and artists often avoided openly political public work. The revolution claimed public space partly by claiming the right to mark it, to paint it, to make it visually speak resistance.

This claiming of space through art was not secondary to "real" political action. It was political action. Transforming walls from blank or state-marked surfaces into movement-marked surfaces changed whose space it was. When a neighborhood's walls are covered with revolution murals, the state no longer controls that space visually. The movement does. This matters psychologically and strategically.

But this chapter refuses spectacle. It refuses the aestheticization of suffering. It refuses the foreign gaze that approaches war art like a theatre of horror: hungry for images that can be shared, captioned, consumed, turned into proof of one's own

political consciousness.

Sudanese war-born art must not be treated as content for empathy. It must be treated as human residue that survived the attempt to erase it.

A poster is not merely propaganda; it is an act of communal coherence, a way to maintain shared purpose when everything else is fragmenting. A mural is not merely protest decoration; it is a refusal of disappearance, an insistence on visibility when the regime wants certain deaths invisible. A camp drawing is not merely "resilience"; it is the minimal evidence that the self remained intact enough to leave a mark, to claim: I was here, I saw this, I survived to tell it.

What made 2018 distinct from 1964 or 1985 was not only scale. It was also composition, speed, media, and visibility. Earlier uprisings had major centers—trade unions, professional associations, particular cities, and organized political formations. The 2018–2019 uprising also had organization, especially through professional associations and neighborhood resistance structures, but its body was broader and more visibly plural: young people in provincial towns, workers and students, women at the front of the image, regions speaking through the same demand in different accents. The demand was singular, that thirty years end, but the body making it was plural in a way that changed the visual language.

This breadth shaped the iconography. The art had to speak to and for different regions, ethnicities, classes, and generations. This is why the iconography often reached for symbols of pre-Islamic Sudan, including Nubian queens; symbols of diverse Sudanese geography, including river, desert, and mountain; and symbols of shared suffering, including martyrs from different regions. The visual vocabulary had to build unity without

erasing difference, had to assert "we are all Sudanese" without demanding that anyone abandon particular identity.

War reshapes visual language structurally. It compresses, because there is no time for elaborate composition when you need to paint before security forces arrive. It sharpens, because symbols must be immediately readable to crowds moving quickly through dangerous spaces. It makes symbol do more work with less time: a single image must carry political message, emotional appeal, tactical information, and aesthetic force.

It also forces the aesthetic into public urgency: art becomes not the slow discipline of the studio but the fast ethics of the street. The artist cannot afford to be precious about technique when people are dying. The work serves or it fails its moment. This creates a different relationship between maker and work—less about self-expression alone, more about collective need.

Yet even here, even under these pressures, the deepest Sudanese intelligence remains visible: the refusal to surrender dignity. The human does not only cry. The human composes. Even under bombardment, even in displacement camps, even facing erasure, the hand continues to draw, the wall continues to speak, the pattern continues to insist that beauty is not a luxury but a fundamental human right; that to make art under war is not frivolous distraction, but essential proof of humanity's persistence.

The murals that accumulated across the sit-in's weeks were not incidental to what happened there. They were its visual memory, the most concentrated record of what the movement believed and demanded. When regime forces cleared the camp in June 2019, they painted over murals and erased visual records from the site. But documentation had already begun. Photographs, digital archives, social media circulation, and memory

itself preserved what the walls could not hold forever. Human rights lawyers and artists later emphasized that on June 3, security forces not only killed protesters but wiped and painted over the murals.

The documentation of erased murals becomes its own form of resistance. The regime can paint over the walls, but it cannot paint over every photograph, every shared image, every map, every witness, every memory of what was there. The work lives on in reproduction, documentation, and collective refusal.

This is crucial: war art survives not only in its physical form but in its documentation, its circulation, its entry into collective memory. Even destroyed murals continue to function politically and aesthetically through their archived images.

Let the record show: Sudanese war art is not "about war" as a theme, not distant aesthetic meditation on violence. It is war's failure to fully erase the human, each gesture a thin, stubborn line drawn against oblivion, each mural a refusal of forgetting, each drawing proof that interior life persisted when everything exterior was being destroyed. The work does not transcend violence. It marks the places where violence tried to erase and failed, where humanity reasserted itself through color and line and the determination to make something beautiful in the midst of everything ugly.

14

The Lens of Silence: Withheld Testimony as Strategy

In Sudan, silence is not empty. It is armored. It is a shield that has learned language. Censorship does not only ban speech; it trains the body to hesitate. It teaches the tongue to become careful. It teaches families to communicate in glances, in metaphors, in half-sentences that carry full histories.

Under regimes of surveillance and under social conditions where consequences arrive quickly and unpredictably, testimony becomes a dangerous luxury. So Sudanese art, like Sudanese speech, often learns to survive through omission. Not the omission of ignorance, but the omission of safety.

For thirty years under Omar al-Bashir's regime, artists, writers, journalists, activists, and ordinary citizens learned to speak with caution. The direct statement could bring censorship, harassment, interrogation, detention, or professional consequence. The explicit critique could get a newspaper confiscated, an exhibition pressured, a public event cancelled, or a name placed under security attention. Sudanese authorities repeatedly censored media, restricted expression, and cracked down on

activists and journalists during the Bashir years, especially when political criticism touched state violence, corruption, religion, or justice.

So art developed its own encrypted language: images that appeared decorative to the censor but carried heavier meaning to those who knew how to read. This is not metaphor as poetic ornament. This is metaphor as survival technology.

The mechanics of this coding are sophisticated. You cannot make it so obvious that the censor catches on, but you cannot make it so obscure that your intended audience misses it. You walk a knife-edge between legibility and protection. A bird in a painting may remain only a bird to the censor; to a viewer who knows the poem, the martyr, the exile, the banned song, or the political wound being echoed, it may become something else entirely. The image survives because it refuses to confess too quickly.

This places particular demands on the audience. The art does not hand you its meaning. It withholds, deflects, encodes. To follow it, you must bring cultural knowledge, political awareness, historical memory. You must know what cannot be said directly in order to recognize when it is being said indirectly.

What emerges is a community of readers bound by shared code: people who recognize the references, who understand what is being withheld and why. This is not without its own form of closure. The work opens toward those who already know, and that opening is also, inevitably, a boundary.

Coded artworks emerge from this ecology with specific formal characteristics. Symbols become double-edged tools: a bird that can mean flight, disappearance, exile, or burial depending on context, color, and composition. A tree that can mean rootedness, family lineage, hanging, knowledge, or loss depending

on how it is rendered. A pattern that can read as ornament to the untrained eye and as warning, mourning, or resistance to those who know how to read it.

Abstraction, in particular, becomes shelter. When you paint abstractly, the censor cannot easily reduce the work to a single prosecutable statement. What is this painting about? It is about color, form, composition. It is not "about" anything that can be neatly articulated as political critique. Yet for viewers who share the context, formal choices carry weight: the violent red that dominates the canvas, the fragmented composition that refuses coherence, the empty spaces that feel like absences, the repetitive marks that feel like compulsion, trauma, or the desperate attempt to hold something together.

This is one reason Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq's Crystalist work remains so important. Ishaq, a pioneering Sudanese painter and one of the first women to graduate from the College of Fine Arts in Khartoum, helped form the Crystalist Group in the 1970s and developed a practice that challenged the male-dominated Sudanese art scene. Her work often explored women's bodies, spiritual experience, psychological states, and social constraint through distortion, translucency, and ambiguity rather than straightforward narrative.

Her engagement with Zār is central here. Ishaq studied and painted Zār ceremonies, where women—and sometimes men—gather in ritual, spiritual, and therapeutic contexts involving possession, bargaining with spirits, performance, and healing. These ceremonies are not simply aesthetic subjects. They are intimate social and spiritual worlds, tied to women's experience, bodily distress, psychological pressure, and communal forms of care.

By working through distortion, crystalline form, and symbolic

density, Ishaq created a visual language that could hold women's constrained lives, women's spiritual practices, and women's psychological realities without reducing them to documentary explanation. Is this painting about Zār ceremonies? It may be. Is it about transformation, pressure, possession, emotional strain, or women's social life? It may be that too. The work can be read multiple ways, and this multiplicity is part of its force.

The work can say what it cannot declare. It can carry grief without indicting a single hand. It can carry critique without flattening itself into slogan. It can protect the privacy of the practice while acknowledging its aesthetic and spiritual importance.

When you paint a grieving mother, you do not need to specify who killed her son. The grief itself becomes accusation: against whoever created the conditions for grief, against systems that make mothers bury children, against political arrangements that normalize violence. The work points without naming.

This is not evasiveness. This is ethics under threat.

Metaphor becomes protection in literal ways. If security forces, officials, or hostile observers examine a work for evidence of sedition, ambiguity matters. A painting of a bird is easier to defend than a poster naming a general. A fractured red field is harder to prosecute than a written accusation. Ambiguity is not only aesthetic choice. Under certain conditions, it becomes legal, social, and bodily strategy.

This creates interesting tensions around interpretation. The artist may want some viewers to understand the political dimensions while protecting themselves from accusation by authorities. This means the work must be simultaneously open and closed: readable to initiates, opaque to outsiders.

This is the opposite of how Western art discourse often

imagines itself: as universal, accessible to any educated viewer, transcending particular contexts. Sudanese coded art often refuses this universal accessibility. It requires entry into particular knowledge systems to be fully read.

The domestic sphere becomes particularly important in this ecology of coded expression. The home is not outside surveillance—regimes can recruit informants, monitor families, and punish kinship networks—but it can offer more cover than the street, the gallery, the newspaper, or the radio. Women's craft, ornament, speech, and domestic practice can therefore become zones where memory, grief, and coded testimony travel relatively unnoticed.

A woven pattern can carry information that would be dangerous if written. The pattern looks decorative, traditional, apolitical. But if you know the maker, the occasion, the deviation from ordinary usage, or the context of its making, you may read more than surface. A wedding pattern used outside a wedding might signal celebration that cannot be publicly acknowledged. A mourning color, rhythm, or motif might signal a death that has been officially denied. The pattern becomes code, and the home becomes the space where this coded communication circulates.

Henna designs can work similarly. Applied to women's bodies for celebrations, transitions, and ritual occasions, henna appears as cultural practice: traditional, feminine, domestic. But the specific patterns chosen, the timing of application, the refusal or insistence on adornment during periods of mourning or fear—all of these can carry meaning to those who know how to read.

When women gather for henna nights or other intimate forms of sociality, they create spaces that are partly protected from the dominant public gaze. What is said in these spaces, what is

marked on these bodies, operates in a register that may appear apolitical but can still carry political and social content.

This is not to romanticize women's domestic labor as inherently resistant. Much domestic work is simply work: survival, duty, the daily repetition of tasks necessary to maintain life. But under conditions of censorship, the domestic sphere's relative privacy can make it available for forms of coded communication in ways the public sphere is not. Women may become carriers of certain kinds of memory precisely because their work is dismissed as merely decorative, merely functional, merely private.

Silence is especially charged for women because the social cost of visibility is not evenly distributed. A man who speaks publicly faces censorship, imprisonment, violence. A woman who speaks publicly can face all of that plus reputational destruction, sexualized threat, social ostracism, and family shame. During the Bashir era, Sudan's public order regime policed women's public behavior and appearance with particular severity; the law was only repealed in November 2019.

So women's testimony frequently travels through coded channels: craft, domestic form, ornament, rhythm, the aesthetics of the home. What the public sphere forbids, the domestic sphere preserves in pattern. What the official archive refuses, the private archive carries quietly.

Here, silence is not consent. It is strategy. It is survival that refuses to become spectacle. It is the determination to maintain witness even when witness cannot be spoken.

The ethical complexity emerges when we consider what silence protects and what it costs. Silence protects the speaker from immediate harm: arrest, violence, social punishment, family exposure. But silence can also allow the conditions that

require silence to continue. If no one speaks, if all testimony remains coded and hidden, the regime faces less pressure to change. This creates impossible positions: speak and be destroyed, or stay silent and watch destruction continue.

Many Sudanese artists navigate this by finding threshold positions: ways to speak that are just legible enough to matter, just coded enough to survive. They push boundaries incrementally, testing what can be said, how much directness a regime, faction, institution, or community will tolerate at a given moment. These calculations shift constantly based on political conditions.

During periods of relative opening, artists can be more direct. During crackdowns, coding intensifies.

The 2019 revolution created a brief period when silence became less necessary. For a few months, artists could speak directly. Street art could mock al-Bashir, commemorate martyrs, name violence, and depict military power with open accusation. The work from this period is striking in its directness. Finally, the ability to say clearly what had been said in code for decades.

But that openness was fragile. After the violent dispersal of the sit-in on June 3, 2019, the revolutionary visual field darkened. Reporting and scholarship on Sudan's uprising note that protest art shifted after the massacre: brighter colors gave way to harsher palettes, martyrs, rape crimes, military violence, and grief. Security forces also painted over or erased murals after the sit-in, turning the destruction of art into a second act of suppression.

As military power remained central and the transitional period failed to secure a stable freedom of expression, silence returned as a necessary skill. Artists who had become accustomed to direct speech had to re-enter the old languages of code, metaphor, and strategic withholding. Some faced harassment,

intimidation, public pressure, or the forced erasure of their work. The precise consequences varied, but the lesson was familiar: openness had limits, and those limits could be enforced violently.

The 2023 war intensified this dynamic. Artists working inside Sudan cannot always say what they are witnessing. The risks are too high, not just for themselves but for their families, their communities, and anyone identifiable through their testimony. Social media has become a major battlefield in the SAF–RSF war: a space of propaganda, intimidation, hate speech, military narrative, and public accusation. Reports since the war began have documented the weaponization of social media, online incitement, and the circulation of violent or self-incriminating footage by armed actors and supporters.

So the work develops a particular texture during this war period. It shows enough to acknowledge reality—yes, this is happening; yes, we see it—but not so much that it exposes people to danger. It walks a knife-edge between testimony and protection.

This is not cowardice. This is the complex calculation of how to bear witness without getting yourself or others killed.

Some artists choose complete silence. They stop posting, stop making work public, retreat from visible artistic practice. This is also a choice that should be respected, not criticized. The demand that artists "speak out" often comes from those who face none of the consequences of speaking.

It is easy to demand bravery from a safe distance. The artists living through war must decide for themselves what level of risk is sustainable.

And the ethic of this chapter is simple: do not punish withheldness by demanding disclosure. Do not treat silence as deficiency.

The modern critic often approaches art like a courtroom: tell me what happened. Explain yourself. Provide evidence. Make yourself transparent. Prove your political commitment by being legible to me. But Sudanese silence is often a moral decision: I will not deliver my people's vulnerability to your appetite for clarity. I will not give you the specific details that could be used to harm specific people. I will not satisfy your curiosity at the cost of someone's safety.

The critic's job, then, is not to extract confession. It is to witness the shield. It is to recognize that opacity is sometimes the only ethical option available, that withholding is an active choice deserving respect, not a passive failure deserving criticism. It is to understand that silence can be loud; that it can be its own form of testimony about conditions so dangerous that testimony becomes impossible.

This requires a different kind of criticism, one that respects boundaries, that understands that not everything is meant to be legible to everyone, that recognizes withholding as intelligent strategy rather than aesthetic failure. The Post-Interpretive approach insists: some things are kept deliberately unclear, and that opacity is not a problem to be solved. It is a boundary to be honored. It is a door marked "do not enter" that should be respected, not forced open.

The reader trained in Western transparency will find this frustrating. They want the work to "open up." They want "access." They want the artist to make themselves vulnerable for the reader's benefit, to provide the full story, to eliminate ambiguity. But access is not a right when access itself has been weaponized. Interpretation has historically functioned as a tool of extraction: the colonizer interpreting the native culture, and in the process claiming to understand it better than the people

who live it; the ethnographer explaining Indigenous practice, and in the process flattening it into data; the critic decoding the artwork, and in the process claiming ownership over its meaning.

All of these interpretive acts can function as forms of violence when they insist on making visible what was strategically kept hidden. When the critic demands that the work reveal its political content, the critic may not realize they are asking the artist to expose themselves or others to danger. When the viewer wants full explanation, they may not understand that full explanation could compromise specific people. The desire for transparency is not innocent. It has costs that are borne by others.

So Sudanese silence teaches a harder lesson: that understanding is not always the goal. Sometimes the goal is simply to remain near the work without demanding that it surrender itself. Sometimes the ethical stance is: I see that you are not telling me everything, and I respect that decision.

I will not interpret your silence as an invitation to dig deeper. I will not mistake your opacity for a puzzle that exists for me to solve. I will accept that there are things I am not meant to know, and I will be at peace with not knowing them.

This is particularly important for work emerging from contexts of trauma. Survivors of violence often cannot speak about what happened, not because they have forgotten, but because the memory is too raw, too dangerous, too likely to re-traumatize. Trauma does not create a narrative that can be neatly told.

Trauma fragments narrative, breaks causality, makes time non-linear, creates gaps that cannot be bridged by explanation. Demanding that art "process" or "express" trauma in ways that

make it legible to viewers is demanding that the artist re-open wounds for the viewer's benefit.

Silence, in these contexts, is not avoidance. It is self-protection. It is the psyche's wisdom about what can be spoken and what must be held.

The work may carry traces of trauma without naming it directly. It may be present in the formal choices: the fracturing of composition because the self is fractured; the darkness of palette because the world has gone dark; the violence of brushstroke because the body remembers violence; the emptiness of space because something that should be there is missing.

These are somatic responses: the body speaking through the hand even when the mouth stays closed. The hand knows things the mind cannot articulate. The mark on the canvas carries weight the artist may not be able to explain verbally.

To read these traces requires sensitivity, not interrogation. It requires sitting with uncertainty rather than rushing toward conclusion. It requires being comfortable with not understanding fully, with sensing that something heavy is present without needing to name exactly what it is.

There is also the question of what silence protects culturally. Some practices, some stories, some aesthetic forms are considered private by the communities that hold them. They are not meant for outsiders. They are specifically not meant to be explained in ways that outsiders can access. This is not obscurantism. It is sovereignty. It is the community's right to maintain boundaries around what they share and what they keep.

When critics demand that Sudanese art "explain itself," they may be demanding that communities surrender their sovereignty, that they make their private practices public, that

they translate their internal logics into forms palatable to outsiders. The refusal to do this is not failure to communicate. It is refusal to submit to the assumption that everything must be made available to everyone.

This becomes especially charged around religious practices, women's practices, and practices involving altered states of consciousness or spirit possession. Zār ceremonies, for instance, are often painted or referenced in Sudanese art, especially in the work of Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq. But Zār is not simply a public performance. It is a ritual and healing practice with social, spiritual, gendered, and psychological dimensions. To explain it fully to outsiders, or to make it fully "accessible," risks violating its privacy, reducing it to spectacle, or changing the nature of what is being held.

So art that references Zār often maintains a certain reserve. It shows enough to acknowledge the practice's aesthetic and spiritual importance, but not so much that it exposes what should remain private. This is not teasing the viewer. This is honoring the practice by refusing to commodify it, by not turning it into content for outsiders' consumption.

The work becomes a threshold. You can stand at the edge. You can sense that something is happening inside. But you are not invited all the way in unless you have earned that invitation through relationship, initiation, trust, or belonging to the community that holds the practice. The artwork marks the boundary rather than erasing it. This is ethical making: making that knows when to stop, that knows when to protect rather than expose.

Let the record show: silence in Sudanese aesthetics is not emptiness. It is an intelligence forged in danger, a form of speech that refuses to make itself easy to harm. It is strategy

developed over decades of navigating censorship, surveillance, and violence. It is knowledge about what can be said and what must be withheld.

It is respect for practices that should remain private. It is protection of people who are vulnerable. It is refusal of the colonial demand for transparency.

And the critic's task is not to break the silence but to understand why it exists, to honor what it protects, to accept that some things are kept deliberately out of reach: not as failure but as dignity, not as withholding but as wisdom, not as absence but as presence of a different kind. The silence speaks, if you learn how to listen. But learning to listen means accepting that you will not understand everything, that opacity is sometimes the most honest form of communication available, that the shield is as important as what it shields.

15

The Lens of the Ghost: What Sudan Tried to Forget

Sudan keeps an archive, and like all the most important things, it is almost impossible to suppress. It rises through the work with the quiet insistence of a truth that has grown tired of waiting to be acknowledged: slavery, that most profitable of inheritances, trailing its hierarchies and silences behind it like a court train no one will admit is still being worn; the politics of Arabization, which discovered, as such politics often do, that identity is most efficiently managed when rebranded as culture.

The South, whose beauty was never really suppressed so much as misfiled under the wrong heading by those who preferred its brilliance at a comfortable distance. Nubia, which the powerful converted into scenery while living Nubian communities remained inconveniently present; ethnic tension, which polite society has often agreed not to discuss, and which has therefore been forced to conduct itself as atmosphere.

None of these are topics. They are the furniture of the room, and the room has been arranged by people who claimed they were simply letting in the light.

Slavery's ghost moves through Sudanese visual culture in ways that are rarely acknowledged directly. This is not ancient history. Slavery and the slave trade in Sudan were formally attacked and gradually dismantled under Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule, with 1924 often marking a decisive legal and administrative moment in that abolition process; but the social hierarchies produced by enslavement and slave raiding did not vanish when legal status changed. Informal bondage, racialized servitude, stigma, and the afterlife of slave descent continued to shape social life long after formal abolition. That means there are people alive today whose grandparents or great-grandparents lived in a world where slavery, servitude, or slave descent were not abstract historical concepts but social facts.

The hierarchies it established—who is considered beautiful, who is considered civilized, who is granted full humanity—persist in aesthetic choices that seem merely formal.

Color choices in painting are never just about color. When a painter consistently renders skin in lighter tones, when darker skin appears primarily on laborers or marginal figures, when beauty standards visually favor Arab features over African features, these are not neutral aesthetic decisions. They carry historical weight.

They reproduce hierarchies that slavery inscribed. The eye has been trained by history to see certain bodies as more worthy of aesthetic attention, more suitable for heroic portrayal, more properly "Sudanese."

But to speak about slavery directly in Sudan is to risk fracturing national unity, to risk opening wounds that the official narrative insists have healed. The nationalist project often requires the fiction that "we are all Sudanese now," that shared citizenship has erased historical violence, that independence

created a clean slate. To insist on slavery's ongoing effects is to be accused of divisiveness, of stirring up old conflicts, of being unpatriotic.

So the art often cannot speak the word "slavery," but it carries the weight anyway. It appears in the careful way certain artists render Black Sudanese bodies, with dignity that pushes against historical degradation, with complexity that refuses stereotyping, with centrality that challenges marginalization. It appears in the choice to paint subjects from marginalized regions, to honor aesthetic traditions from communities historically targeted by raiding, enslavement, or racial contempt, to insist on beauty in bodies that history tried to render as less than human.

It appears also in silences: in the absence of direct engagement with slavery's history, in the way certain narratives are sidestepped, in the topics that remain unaddressed. These silences are not innocent. They reflect the ongoing difficulty of reckoning with a past that implicates powerful lineages, comfortable class positions, national myths of unity, and ongoing forms of racial hierarchy.

The politics of Arabization haunts the work in similarly unspoken ways. For decades, Sudanese state formation was shaped by the privileging of Arabness, Arabic language, and Islam as central markers of national identity. This was not merely cultural preference. In the postcolonial state, Arabization and Islamization operated through education, administration, law, media, and war, especially in relation to South Sudan and other non-Arab or non-Muslim communities. Scholars have described the conflation of Arabic, Arabness, and Islam in twentieth-century Sudan as central to the country's citizenship crisis.

The violence of this was both explicit and implicit. Explicitly: military campaigns against non-Arab and non-Muslim regions, especially in the long wars with the South, were frequently accompanied by civilizational language, Islamic-nationalist rhetoric, and the demand that difference submit to a central state project. Implicitly: educational systems privileged Arabic; state institutions rewarded assimilation into dominant cultural forms; media centered Arab-Islamic Sudanese aesthetics; and non-Arab languages and identities were often pushed into the margins as regional, tribal, or backward.

The art world was not exempt from this pressure. What counted as "Sudanese art" was often what aligned with Arab-Islamic aesthetics or could be incorporated into them. The Khartoum School, while genuinely revolutionary in many ways, still operated within this terrain.

Its synthesis of African and Islamic forms was a major intervention, but it also often centered Arabic calligraphy, Islamic visual inheritance, and an idealized African element as the organizing language of national modernism. The "African" component was sometimes drawn from ancient, symbolic, or generalized forms rather than from sustained institutional recognition of living non-Arab Sudanese cultures. The Khartoum School's achievement remains real; so does the question of what its synthesis included, what it translated, and what it left peripheral.

Non-Arab, non-Islamic aesthetic traditions remained marginal, treated as "ethnic" rather than national, as "craft" rather than art, as regional rather than central. A Dinka scarification pattern becomes anthropology. Arabic calligraphy becomes art. A Beja weaving technique becomes craft. Islamic geometry becomes design. The categories themselves carry

the weight of Arabization: they structure what counts as worthy of serious aesthetic attention and what is relegated to ethnographic curiosity.

This creates painful positions for non-Arab Sudanese and historically Sudanese/South Sudanese artists. To succeed in the national art world often required learning to speak in visual languages legible to Arab-dominated institutions. Or one could refuse this and remain marginal, working within one's own community's aesthetic traditions but without national recognition, institutional support, or the resources that national recognition brings.

Some artists navigate this by code-switching, making work in multiple registers, producing work that fits national frameworks for exhibition and sale while also making work in community-specific forms for different audiences. This is survival strategy, but it is exhausting. It requires constantly negotiating between aesthetic systems, constantly translating, constantly justifying why a particular tradition deserves attention.

The suppressed beauty of the South is the ghost that the 2011 separation should have forced Sudan to confront but largely did not. South Sudan's independence was treated by many in the North as loss, betrayal, or failure of national unity. But it could also have been understood as symptom of the North's failures: failure to include, failure to protect, failure to recognize South Sudanese cultural forms as equally central to the history of the country that once claimed them.

The aesthetic brilliance of South Sudanese traditions—elaborate beadwork systems that encode social information in color and pattern, scarification traditions that mark bodies with aesthetic and spiritual meaning, body arts that use ash and

pigment to create extraordinary visual effects, architectural forms adapted to swamp, savannah, and forest environments, musical traditions with their own scales, rhythms, and instruments—remained underrepresented in institutions that claimed to represent "Sudanese" art before separation.

Even now, after separation, there is too little sustained engagement with South Sudanese aesthetics as part of the historical field from which Sudanese modernity emerged. The narrative often treats 2011 as a clean break: now there is Sudan and there is South Sudan, and their art histories are separate. But this erases centuries of entanglement, shared and violent history, movement, intermarriage, trade, war, displacement, and the ongoing presence of South Sudanese people and practices in Sudan.

It also risks erasing the violence that made separation politically imaginable. The narrative rarely asks: what conditions made remaining impossible? What exclusions, what sustained violence, what refusal of recognition made independence appear to many as the only viable option? These questions remain largely unasked, which means the conditions that produced them remain largely unaddressed.

The art that does engage with the South can fall into problematic patterns. It either romanticizes the noble traditional culture untainted by modernity or pathologizes the violent tribalist, the underdeveloped primitive, the victim needing rescue. Both are failures to see South Sudanese aesthetic production on its own terms, to recognize it as sophisticated cultural practice rather than exotic other or tragic victim.

Nubia's ghost is perhaps most visible because Nubian culture has been partially recuperated as national heritage, but in a strange, flattened way. Ancient Nubian civilization is celebrated

as proof of Sudan's historical importance. The pyramids at Meroë appear in tourism campaigns, museum displays, national imagery, and public narratives of ancient greatness. Archaeological sites become objects of national pride. Museums display Nubian artifacts with reverence.

But this celebration is highly selective. It celebrates ancient Nubia, safely archaeological, available to be claimed by the nation-state as heritage. It does not equally protect living Nubian communities, who have faced repeated displacement from dam projects, cultural and linguistic pressures, economic marginalization, and the loss or flooding of ancestral lands.

The Merowe Dam, built at the Fourth Cataract, displaced tens of thousands of people—commonly estimated between roughly 50,000 and 70,000—especially the Manasir, Amri, and Hamadab communities along the Nile. These communities are often discussed within the wider history of Nubian and Nile Valley displacement, though it is more precise to name the affected communities rather than simply calling them all "Nubians."

The disconnect is stark: the state and nation celebrate ancient Nubian temples while living Nile communities are displaced from their lands. It displays Nubian artifacts in museums while Nubian languages and place-names face pressure, loss, or decline. It uses Nubian imagery as heritage while political demands for compensation, representation, and cultural protection are often ignored. This is heritage as appropriation: taking the aesthetically useful aspects of Nubian culture while refusing full responsibility for living communities.

Nubian artists work within this contradiction. Their aesthetic forms are sometimes celebrated as "authentically Sudanese," proof of Sudan's ancient civilization, proof of African achieve-

ment, useful for national image. But they can be dismissed as "regional" or "ethnic" when they assert specifically Nubian concerns, when they demand recognition not as heritage but as ongoing cultural practice.

The art becomes a negotiation: how to honor the civilizations that built the pyramids of Meroë while also acknowledging communities displaced by dams? How to claim pride in Nubian heritage while also insisting on justice for living Nubians? How to make work that is recognizably Nubian without being ghettoized as merely ethnic rather than nationally significant?

The characteristic Nubian aesthetic—bright colors, geometric patterns painted on house walls, specific forms of pottery, weaving, and domestic decoration—becomes fraught territory. Is this tradition to be celebrated or folklorized? Is it living culture or heritage preserved like a museum piece? The line between honoring and freezing, between recognition and appropriation, is constantly negotiated.

Ethnic tension remains perhaps the most dangerous ghost because it is recent, raw, and violently unresolved. Darfur's genocide and mass atrocities exposed what the state had long denied: that citizenship does not erase ethnic hierarchy, that "we are all Sudanese" is an aspiration rather than a settled fact, and that state and militia violence can be organized along racialized and ethnic lines.

The systematic targeting of Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa, and other non-Arab groups in Darfur was not an aberration. It intensified existing hierarchies of land, race, ethnicity, state power, and armed impunity. The Sudanese government and allied Janjaweed militias carried out mass atrocities against these communities between 2003 and 2005, and since the 2023 war, the RSF and allied militias have again targeted many of the same

communities. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum notes that the RSF is rooted in the Janjaweed and that recent atrocities in Darfur have targeted civilians based on ethnicity.

Artists working with Darfur's violence face an impossible task. How to represent atrocity without sensationalizing it, without turning genocide into spectacle? How to honor victims without reducing them to victimhood, without denying their complexity as people who had lives before and beyond the violence? How to acknowledge the ethnic dimension without reinforcing ethnic division, without suggesting that ethnicity is inherently divisive rather than something made divisive by political manipulation?

Many choose silence or heavily coded reference. The work carries weight without naming what it carries. A painting might show destruction without specifying whose destruction. A sculpture might evoke loss without detailing who was lost. The work becomes container for grief that cannot be fully articulated, for rage that cannot be safely expressed, for accusation that cannot be directly leveled.

This is strategic silence again, but driven by different pressures than censorship alone. It is driven partly by the trauma being too large to represent directly: how does one make an artwork adequate to hundreds of thousands of deaths, to mass rape as a weapon of war, to entire villages burned, to ongoing displacement of millions? Any representation risks inadequacy, risks diminishing the scale of what happened.

It is driven partly by ongoing danger. The militias that committed violence in Darfur were not fully dismantled. Many fighters and commanders associated with Janjaweed structures became part of the RSF, the paramilitary force now waging war across Sudan. To explicitly name their crimes can invite retaliation. The ghosts are not safely historical. They are

walking around with guns. They are in power. They are capable of killing again.

It is driven partly by the difficulty of addressing ethnic violence in a national art context. To make work explicitly about Darfur's ethnic dimension risks being accused of tribalism, divisiveness, or anti-Arab sentiment. Some national narratives reduce the violence to land and resources alone, as if ethnicity were secondary or incidental. To insist on the ethnic and racialized dimension challenges that story, which can mean risking exclusion from institutions, funding, recognition, or safety.

The 2023 war has reopened these ghosts simultaneously. RSF violence in Darfur has repeated many of the patterns of earlier atrocities: ethnicized targeting, mass killing, sexual violence, displacement, and attacks on non-Arab communities. The power struggle between SAF and RSF also reflects deeper questions about who gets to define Sudan, whose violence becomes state violence and whose violence becomes rebellion, whose vision of Sudan gets to prevail, and whether the country can exist beyond an Arab-Islamic nationalist frame.

The destruction of cultural infrastructure during the war reflects the vulnerability of Sudan's memory itself. Museums have been looted or damaged, universities burned or occupied, archives endangered, laboratories desecrated, and artists, scholars, museum workers, and cultural custodians forced to flee. Reports from 2023–2025 documented looting, vandalism, combat damage, and destruction affecting the National Museum and other cultural institutions in Khartoum and beyond, with RSF control and looting widely reported in relation to the National Museum. The damage is not merely collateral in a narrow sense. Whether deliberate, opportunistic, or produced

through combat, it strikes at the infrastructure through which Sudan remembers itself.

This is where the Post-Interpretive posture becomes explicit and urgent. I will not solve the ghosts. I cannot solve them. I do not have that power, that knowledge, that moral authority.

To claim I could solve them would be to claim a position outside the haunting, a place from which I could analyze dispassionately and offer solutions. But there is no such place. To write about Sudanese art is to write from inside the haunted house. The ghosts move through my own categories, my own assumptions, my own desire for coherence.

I will not turn the ghosts into neat arguments. This chapter will not end with solutions, with recommendations, with the critic's typical move of identifying the problem and then proposing how to fix it. That move assumes that problems of this magnitude can be fixed through cultural intervention, that addressing ghosts in art history somehow addresses the material conditions that created them.

This is fantasy. This is the critic's delusion of relevance.

I will not offer the reader the comfort of resolution, because comfort has often been the accomplice of erasure. The modern reader wants closure because closure is control. If the chapter ends with clear conclusions, the reader can file it away as understood, as handled, as no longer requiring attention.

But the haunted archive refuses control. It insists that some histories remain morally unfinished, and that the ethical task is not to finish them with language, but to stay beside them until the reader's desire to "understand" collapses into humility.

To stand beside a ghost is to accept that the ghost is not an object.

It is a demand.

It demands that we recognize the limits of our explanations. Slavery's ongoing effects cannot be fully mapped or measured. Arabization's violence cannot be undone by better cultural policy. The South's separation cannot be retrospectively prevented. Nubian displacement cannot be compensated by heritage recognition. Ethnic violence cannot be resolved by art criticism. These are problems that exceed the reach of aesthetic intervention.

The ghosts demand that we stop using interpretation as a way to keep pain at a safe intellectual distance. When we interpret slavery's residue in visual culture, we risk turning it into an interesting analytical problem rather than ongoing injustice. When we analyze Arabization's aesthetic effects, we risk treating it as historical process rather than continuing violence. The move to interpretation can be a move away from implication, a way to study the wound without acknowledging our proximity to the systems that produced wounds.

The ghosts demand that we acknowledge how institutions—colonial, national, cultural—have curated forgetting with professional skill. Museums decide what to display and what to store. Archives decide what to preserve and what to let decay. Curricula decide which artists to teach and which to omit. Funding bodies decide which work to support and which to starve. All of these decisions shape what is remembered and what is forgotten, and none of them are neutral.

Sometimes forgetting is not accidental. Sometimes it is policy. The state that claims ancient Nubian heritage while displacing living Nile communities is not simply confused. It is strategic.

The art institutions that celebrate the Khartoum School while ignoring non-Arab aesthetic traditions are not merely ignorant. They are reproducing hierarchies. The critics who discuss

Sudanese modernism without addressing slavery's legacy are not only forgetful. They are avoiding discomfort.

Sometimes forgetting is pride. Sometimes it is the price of an identity that cannot survive truth. To build a unified Sudanese national identity has often required papering over certain divisions, creating a narrative of shared heritage that elides whose heritage is actually shared and whose is marginalized. The cost of this identity is the truth it must suppress.

Sudanese art often functions as a custodian of erasure: it carries what the official narrative tries to smooth over. It does this not always through explicit imagery, but through atmosphere, omission, fracture, residue. The ghost appears as a gap in the archive: the artists who never received recognition, the traditions that were never documented, the aesthetic practices that were dismissed as craft.

The ghost appears as stubborn motif, the recurring image that makes no sense until you understand the history it is trying to carry. The ghost appears as silence that feels too heavy to be merely aesthetic: the topic that is consistently avoided, the region that is consistently underrepresented, the experience that finds no visual form.

The work becomes a site where the unreturnable remains present, not as explanation, but as pressure. You feel something in the work that you cannot name. You sense absence. You recognize that something is being withheld or something has been lost. This pressure is the ghost making itself felt. It does not appear as a clear image that can be identified and discussed.

It appears as disturbance in the field, as the place where the work does not cohere, as the tension that cannot be resolved.

The reader who wants this chapter to "explain" the ghosts has misunderstood the project fundamentally. Explanation would

require a position outside the haunting, a place from which one could analyze dispassionately, a perspective untouched by the history being discussed. But there is no such place.

If you are reading this as a Western academic, you may inherit colonial structures that helped create these ghosts: categories that separated "Arab" from "African," hierarchies that ranked civilizations, institutions that extracted artifacts and knowledge.

If you are reading this as Sudanese diaspora, you may carry these ghosts in your own family histories, your own ambiguous identities, your own negotiations between belonging and exclusion. Your own family may have been slave-owning or enslaved, Arabizers or Arabized, perpetrators or victims, or some complicated combination of these. You do not get to analyze this from outside. You are implicated.

If you are reading this as Sudanese in Sudan, you live daily with the consequences of what remains unresolved. You navigate ethnic tensions that cannot be named, you participate in hierarchies you may not consciously recognize, you inherit structures you did not personally create but that structure your life regardless. You are inside the haunted house, whether you acknowledge the ghosts or not.

No one gets to be innocent observer. This is crucial. The fantasy of neutral analysis is a fantasy of innocence: the belief that we can study the ghosts without being touched by them, that we can remain clean while handling dirty history.

But the ghosts do not grant this distance. They implicate everyone who comes near. They demand: what is your relationship to this?

How do you benefit from the structures that created me? What are you willing to give up to address the injustice I represent?

These are not rhetorical questions. These are demands for ethical reckoning. And most of us fail them.

Most of us—myself included—want to acknowledge the ghosts without changing the material structures they haunt. We want to be thoughtful about history without sacrificing present comfort. We want to be on the right side intellectually while remaining on the comfortable side materially.

So the reader must be trained here, must be confronted with the insufficiency of reading as response. If you feel impatient, if you want the chapter to "resolve," that impatience is the very habit that makes ghosts necessary. The desire to be finished is the desire to be innocent, the wish to acknowledge history and then move on, to feel that understanding equals absolution.

This book does not grant innocence. It does not grant absolution. It grants proximity.

Proximity means staying near the ghosts without demanding they become comprehensible. It means acknowledging that slavery's residue shapes contemporary aesthetics without pretending we can trace every causal line, without claiming to fully understand how historical violence becomes internalized as aesthetic preference. It means recognizing that Arabization's violence continues without claiming we can neatly separate "Arab" from "African" identity, without pretending that addressing cultural violence solves structural violence.

It means honoring Nubia's living presence without flattening it into nationalist symbol, without turning living communities into heritage assets. It means sitting with ethnic tension's ongoing reality without rushing toward false unity, without pretending that calling everyone "Sudanese" erases the hierarchies that make that identity unequal. It means accepting that South Sudan's separation was a symptom of Sudan's failures

without claiming to know how those failures could have been avoided.

The aesthetic consequence of haunting is fracture. Work that carries ghosts cannot be smoothly coherent. It contradicts itself because the reality it emerges from is contradictory. It contains ruptures it cannot explain because the ruptures in the social world cannot be explained. They can only be witnessed. It gestures toward something it cannot name because naming would require making explicit what may remain strategically unclear, emotionally impossible, or historically unresolved.

This fracture is not failure. It is honesty. It is the work refusing to lie about the coherence of Sudanese identity, refusing to pretend there is one unified Sudanese culture, refusing to suggest that Sudanese history has been resolved. The fracture is evidence of the ghosts' presence. The work breaks where the ghosts press against it. The composition fails where the ghost disrupts it. The narrative stutters where the ghost interferes.

Western art history tends to read fracture as postmodern fragmentation, as deliberate aesthetic strategy, as the artist choosing to fragment as stylistic move. But Sudanese fracture is not always chosen. Often, it is inherited. It is not simply strategy. It is symptom.

The work fractures because the ground beneath it is fractured. The artist does not always decide to create ruptured composition; the rupture erupts through the work because the historical field is ruptured.

To smooth the work into coherence would be to lie about the ground. To unify the composition would be to falsely claim that Sudanese reality is unified. To resolve the tensions would be to suggest that the historical tensions have been resolved.

The fracture is the truth the work cannot avoid. It is the

ghost's mark, the place where haunting becomes visible.

Let the record show: Sudan's ghosts are not puzzles to be solved; they are moral presences to be endured, until the reader learns the first mature lesson of witnessing: that some histories demand humility, not mastery. The haunted archive does not ask for understanding. It asks for acknowledgment.

It asks that we stop pretending we can know completely, explain fully, resolve finally. It asks that we learn to live with what cannot be settled, to make art near what cannot be spoken, to stay present with what refuses to be made comfortable.

The ghosts will not be solved by this chapter. They will not be explained away by better interpretation. They will not be resolved by more sensitive curatorial practice.

They remain because the conditions that created them remain. They haunt because the violence that generated them continues in new forms. They press against the work because they press against the world, because Sudan has not yet fully reckoned with slavery, Arabization, ethnic hierarchy, displacement, and the suppressed beauty of marginalized communities.

The work can only carry this. It cannot solve it. And the critic can only witness the carrying, can only stay near the weight, can only refuse the false comfort of claiming to understand what cannot be understood from outside.

This is the lesson of the ghost: stay humble, stay near, stay honest about your limits. The ghost exceeds your categories. Let it.

16

Epilogue: The Custodian's Oath

I did not write this book to capture Sudan.

Capture is what empires do.

I wrote it to stand near what survives—near the forms that carried breath through heat, carried memory through rupture, carried dignity through displacement, carried beauty through war, carried silence through danger. I wrote it to refuse the crude habit of turning Sudan into a narrative that comforts outsiders. This is not a book of ownership. It is a book of proximity.

So I end with an oath, not as theatre, but as discipline. I will not treat Sudanese art as a resource for my cleverness. I will not translate it into slogans to satisfy impatient readers.

I will not mistake interpretation for intimacy. I will not aestheticize suffering. I will not ask the work to perform its wounds for my certainty.

I will approach each object, each motif, each silence, each fracture, as evidence of a people's ongoing struggle to remain coherent in a world that has repeatedly tried to dismantle them.

I will remember that institutions are not neutral, that archives are political, that forgetting is often curated, and that the critic's

first responsibility is not to speak, but to listen. I will remember that beauty is not decoration but discipline, that silence is not emptiness but shield, that craft is not lesser but foundational, that the domestic is not peripheral but primary, and that exile is not accident but material.

And when the ghosts arrive, when the archive trembles with what cannot be safely named; I will not force resolution. I will stay beside the haunting until my own appetite for control dissolves. I will accept that humility is sometimes the only honest aesthetic conclusion.

Let the record show: the custodian does not arrive to own meaning. He arrives to protect presence, so that what survived history's violence is not violated again by the violence of our language.